

## Story of a South African Boy

### John Syme's Autobiography

#### Introduction

John Syme was intimately connected with the Molteno family almost his whole adult life. Born in Durban in 1893, he settled in Cape Town around 1914. He married in 1921 Frank and Ella Molteno's younger daughter, Nesta, who was one of Sir John Molteno's many granddaughters. For a short time following her father's tragic death five years later in the Salt River Rail Disaster of 1926,



**John Syme, 1920s**

she and John lived with her mother, Ella, at Claremont House. This lasted until the old family home, which had been in the hands of the family since the 1860s, was sold by them in November 1929. Nearly a decade later, John and Nesta got divorced for reasons which will become apparent in his autobiography. Quite soon, John then married Nesta's first cousin, Joan Molteno, who was my aunt.

I well remember as a boy in the 1950s how every Christmas Eve a big family party would be held in rotation at Joan and John's, or her sister Jocelyn and Frank Morris's, or my parents' place (my father Donald being their eldest brother). Every year, one of the men had to dress up as Father Christmas. And when the party was held at my family's home on Little Princess Vlei, all we cousins bounced up and down with excitement to see how he would come. No chimneys for Father Christmas in summer! Instead he might arrive on horseback (on one of my mother, Molly's, horses), or land from our small teak rowing boat on the vlei. Uncle John was a splendidly warm and friendly

Father Christmas. A few years later, he made particular friends with my younger brother, Patrick. The two of them shared a love of machinery and John was the only member of the family who could really relate to Patrick in this way. As a young adolescent, Packy spent endless Saturdays with Uncle John in his workshop fixing old cars and messing about with all things mechanical and electrical.

Uncle John was a remarkable and warm-hearted man. His life had been an extraordinary one, and difficult, as his account makes clear. He went through many ups and downs, both in his businesses and in his personal life. But he had great courage and determination. He never allowed commercial difficulties or the problems he encountered following his reunion with his parents to defeat him. Tall with a slight stoop when I knew him as a boy, he retained an essential gentleness and

generosity of spirit. This did not mean that he didn't have a strong will and an inflexible commitment to doing whatever he thought was right, no matter how unconventional or even unwise other people might regard his actions. The special kindness and affection he showed towards Patrick – and this is only to cite the example I know of personally – was something my brother carried with him all his life. And for John, Packy stood in perhaps for the son he never had, someone who could enter in fully to his lifelong love of engineering and machinery.

This autobiography was written towards the end of his life. He had lost his wife, Joan, utterly unexpectedly when she flew up to Joburg in 1960 to visit friends and had a fatal heart attack on arrival at the ridiculously young age of fifty. John was devastated. Her death was just the latest of the blows he had suffered in his life. But he was 67 years old by this time. He sat down and wrote out by hand his personal story – all 46,000 words of it – in an exercise book stamped *Claremont Engineering Journal*. Perhaps writing the story was a form of catharsis. All the more so, since he had always been reluctant to talk about his childhood and growing up.

His life story, extraordinary as it is in personal terms, has a wider interest too. John grew up on a farm in the South African Republic in the 1890s. This was one of the two Boer Republics Great Britain decided to go to war against a few years later. He gives us an unforgettable picture of a little white boy growing up with black farm workers in an age when machinery had hardly touched South African agriculture. His 'parents' – if you read on, you will discover the reason for the quote marks – fled the SAR when war loomed in 1899, and John then experienced life on a farm in Natal. Zulu was in fact the first language he could speak, and the one his 'parents' had to use when talking to him as a little boy.

The aftermath of the Boer War is made graphically clear when John's family move to Potchefstroom after 1902 and he encounters the realities of the concentration camps in which the British military had incarcerated tens of thousands of Boer women and children. Even more interesting are the years John spent on the diamond fields along the Vaal River in the early 1900s. His eye for detail, superb memory, and love of describing the primitive machinery used by the diggers on these alluvial fields combine to paint a portrait of life there that may be almost unique.

There are a couple more points to make. We owe a debt of gratitude to John's elder daughter, Carin, for typing out her father's long text. And to her and her sister, Jocelyn, for agreeing, now that half a century has passed this since his death in 1966, to let the rest of us read their father's story. And one last thing. John grew up in great poverty and remote parts of South Africa. He got almost no formal schooling as a boy. From his very early teens, he was a self-made man who earned his own living. The result, when it came to writing his life story, is that his lack of facility with sentence construction, grammar and spelling get in the way of our appreciating how remarkable his life was. I have, therefore, felt it essential to rewrite the text, including breaking it up into chapters and inserting headings, as well as explanatory endnotes, in a way that I have not done with the diaries and reminiscences of other members of the family. I can only hope what you read here keeps faith with the character and story of this lovely man.

**Robert Molteno**

August 2012

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## 1. How it all started

### George and Jemima, 1890

This is a true story of a South African boy who started life in strange and unusual circumstances. My father, George, fell in love with a girl called Jemima in about the year 1890. Jemima's mother and father, Mr and Mrs Raubenheimer, had ten children – seven boys and three girls. Jemima was the eldest girl, followed by Helen, and Linda the youngest. The boys were all older than Jemima. The Raubenheimers were farming in the district of George in the Cape Province when Jemima was born. The parents worried later on about having a young girl growing up amongst a number of boys and on a farm. So it was decided to let the girl live with her grandparents, Mr and Mrs Guest, in the township of George. Mrs Raubenheimer had been a Miss Guest before she married. It was arranged that they would take her, educate her, and bring her up. Mr Guest was a man of considerable means who had married a daughter of Lord and Lady Wimborne.<sup>1</sup> They had settled at George. They also had a seaside estate which they called The Wilderness. The grandparents were of the old school – very strict and reserved; one could not go to the house and visit without an invitation. They were, however, respected people in the district. The Raubenheimers' other two younger girls were kept at home as they could hardly ask the grandparents to have them too.

Jemima was growing into a beautiful young woman. She was very talented and strictly brought up. Young men had a hard job to be alone with her for more than a few minutes without the attendance of a chaperone. However one young man did manage it. He was George Syme. George was studying law and working as magistrate's clerk in George at the time. His grandfather had come to the Cape from Montrose in Scotland for his health and had died there on the 27th of April 1863, aged 67 years. His son, William Syme, inherited the house and estate which his father had bought in Cape Town and which he had had laid out by an English gardener and named Palmyra.<sup>2</sup> This property was in the village of Claremont. It could only be reached by a sandy track in those days; horses and carriages being used for transport. This is where George, William's son, was born.

William was a talented man, very popular, and had many friends. His hobby was painting, mostly in oils, he having travelled and taken up art in Rome. He was highly thought of as an artist but, being very modest, painted only for pleasure. He was also interested in photography. Very tall, handsome and soldierly looking, and with charming manners, he married a Miss Rolland, a clever and very beautiful woman. William was a devoted husband and father, but died at the early age of 42. He had two sisters. But they never married and after their parents died, they continued to live at Palmyra until their own deaths. Annie, the eldest, died at the age of 93, a truly wonderful woman.

William's son, young George Syme, had two brothers who never married, and two sisters. One, Evangeline (Vamie ?), married Dr Impey of Cape Town. The other married a Commander Dawson who was in the Navy.

### A baby on the way

George, when he grew up, went to work in the Magistrate's office at the village of George. He made friends with Mr and Mrs Edwards who were friends of old Mr and Mrs Guest. George met Miss Jemima

Raubenheimer at the Edwards' house and fell in love with her. By various arrangements the two of them used to meet there. Eventually he got an introduction to the Guests' home. But of course there was no hope for him to ask for Jemima's hand as he was far from being considered in a suitable position to give her a home and the means she was accustomed to. So a refusal would be certain. Since love however knows few bounds, after a year or so of hidden love, they planned a holiday with friends in the Free State, to whom they went separately. While they were there, they got married secretly and returned to George to live as before. But soon a baby was on the way. To tell the grandparents would have been horror. But, as Jemima was desperate and wanted to get away, George and she arranged for her to go to Natal for a holiday.

She was put in the charge of the captain of a small ship from Mossel Bay and arrived at Durban after a rough trip. There she put up in a hotel under the name of Mrs Raubenheimer, but stayed only a short time. She made an appointment with Dr Mackenzie of Musgrave Road. He was a well-known doctor and most highly respected. On his advice she moved to a house where a midwife with two daughters lived, and took a room there. The midwife was a kindly elderly person and the daughters also nice, friendly and kind.

Mrs Syme, still calling herself Mrs Raubenheimer, stayed on waiting for her baby. She wrote to her grandparents through a great friend who lived in Estcourt in Natal. This friend must have shared her secret as 'Miss Raubenheimer' was supposed to be staying with her. Jemima's letters to her people were enclosed to her friend and posted by the latter from there. And letters to Jemima were redirected by this friend with a change on the envelope from 'Miss' to 'Mrs'. Letters from George, her husband, were sent direct. Money was deposited by him in the Standard Bank in West Street, Durban.

Jemima had the use of a piano at the midwife's home. She used to play and sing a good deal to while away the time; she was a talented player and had a beautiful voice. At times she was sad and put a good deal of sadness and expression into her songs and music. Eventually a baby boy was born on the 14th of July 1893. After a few weeks, Jemima took ship back to her grandparents, having made arrangements to leave her baby with the midwife and her daughters. An arrangement to pay for his care was also made. The baby was to be called for a little later. However, no arrangement to collect him could be made until George Syme improved his position, and that took a much longer time than had been intended.

### **Wedding at last – George Syme and Jemima Raubenheimer get married again**

It took a year or more after the birth before Jemima's grandparents could be persuaded to allow the marriage. Then George and Jemima had their public wedding.

Newspaper Wedding report:

#### **Wedding at George**

One of the most fashionable weddings of the season took place at George last Wednesday morning, when Mr. George Emile Syme, the A.R.M. of East London, was joined in holy matrimony to Miss J. (Pet) Raubenheimer. The ceremony was performed at the D.R. Church by the Rev. Z.J. de Beer, and long before the time announced a large number for friends were assembled to witness the function. This is not to be wondered at, since both the bride and groom were well-known in the town, the former having been brought up

from childhood here and the latter occupying a position in the local Civil Commissioner's office for a considerable period. Both were deservedly popular. The bride, who was given away by her grandfather (W. C. Guest, Esq.) wore a very handsome white silk gown, skirt quite plain, bodice trimmed with choice lace, Court train fastened on the shoulder, wreath of orange blossoms and a very pretty veil. She carried a charming bouquet of cream roses, the gift of the bridegroom and looked charming in every respect. The bride was attended by her sister Helen, as bridesmaid, who was wearing a pretty gown of flowered crepon, cream skirt plain, bodice trimmed with lace and bishop sleeves, white felt hat with pink roses and ostrich feathers, and a pearl brooch, the gift of the bridegroom. She also carried a bouquet of cream roses, the gift of the best man, Mr. Smit, of Dordrecht. Master Donald McIntyre (son of Mr. D. A. McIntyre) performed the duties of page in a most charming manner; his costume was a most tasteful one of blue plush with collar and cuffs of old Irish crochet lace.

After the service at the Church was over, the happy couple left the vestry, whilst the Wedding March was played by the organist. Showers of rice and roses were thrown as Mr. and Mrs. Syme stepped into the carriage.

A reception was afterwards held at the residence of Mr. W. C. Guest, at which a large number of guests were present. Congratulations were tendered and the health of the bride and bridegroom proposed by the Resident Magistrate, which was duly responded to. The Rev. de Beer proposed the health of the parents of the bride and bridegroom, the Ven. Archdeacon Fogg following with that of the grandparents (Mr. and Mrs. Guest). Mr. Guest responded. Mr. P. J. le Roux proposed the toast to the bridesmaid, which was responded to by Mr. Smit, the best man.

During the morning a number of congratulatory telegrams were received from all parts of the country, and the presents were also of a numerous and beautiful description.

A great deal of local interest was taken in the event, and we are sure everybody in George will heartily join in wishing Mr. and Mrs. Syme long life and happiness. The newly married pair left the same day for Mossel Bay *en route* for East London.

### **What happened to the baby – John Syme**

In the meantime Dr Mackenzie in Durban had received a letter from an Englishman who was farming in the Transvaal. He was a Q.C. (Queens Counsel) and a gentleman. His name was Harry. He had three brothers – Albert, Bob and Fred. Harry had met a youngish woman in Durban, Eva, who was a widow. She was one of the Cowie girls and previously been married to a Mr McNeal. As she did not have a child, her husband ran off with a barmaid and soon after died. The Cowies were a well-known and respected Durban family. Cowies Hill near Durban is named after them. They were English and had come out to South Africa shortly after 1820. One sister, Ellen, married Frank Brokenshaw. They lived in a large double-storey house named Pendennis on the Berea in Durban. He was a partner in Harvey Greenacer and Co in West Street, Durban. Another Cowie girl married Gordon Thomas; they had two children -- Bob and Marion. Marion died in tragic circumstances and Bob also died early in life. Gordon Thomas was a well-to-do man; he had lost his wife and later suffered ill health. Eva also had a brother, Ethelbert Hawtry Cowie, who was a commercial traveler in India.

Harry married Eva. They were both past middle age. They went to live on his farm in the Transvaal<sup>3</sup> near Boksburg and Germiston. They badly needed a child to complete their happiness. This is why they wrote to Dr Mackenzie in Durban to look out for one, and for preference a boy. The doctor passed the letter on to the midwife, Mrs Gibbs. She discussed it with her daughters. They were already looking after a baby girl who had been abandoned. They now thought they would be stranded with the baby boy, too, and they could not afford to look after more children. Harry's letter to Dr McKenzie now opened up the chance of handing the baby boy over to good people. Perhaps he would have a much better chance in life. This seemed a very acceptable plan. And although his upkeep was still being paid for, it seemed very likely that his parents would never turn up – as often happens in these cases – and the payments would stop.

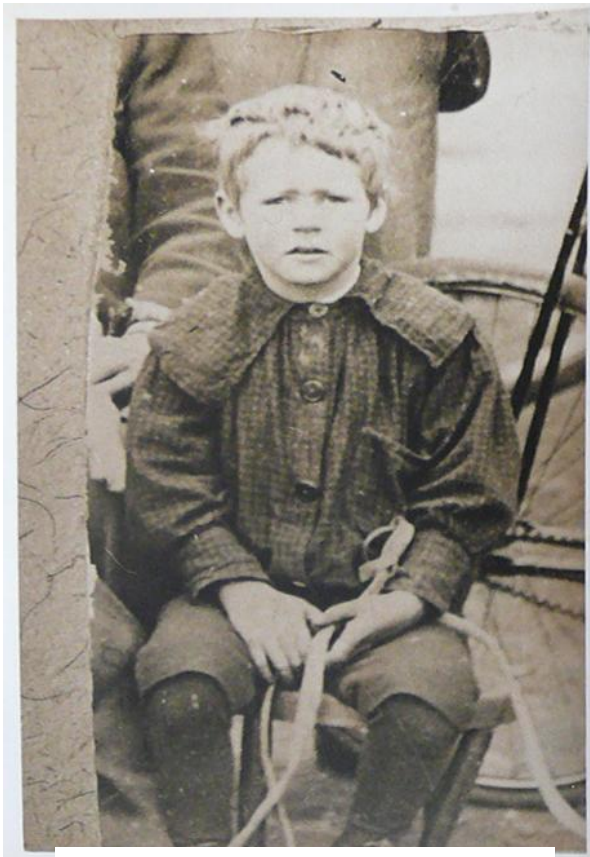


## 2. My early growing up

### Life as a little boy on a farm in the South African Republic – 1890s

So all was arranged (at a price) to send the baby boy to the Transvaal. A lady was to take the child up and be met at Johannesburg station. And from there he would be taken by Cape cart to the farm. In this way Harry and Eva got a baby boy. Having no experience of babies at all, however, they used the assistance of Maband<sup>4</sup> and his wife. They were reliable Zulu farm natives. Maband was appointed to take care of the baby and play with him. He carried him usually on his shoulders with a leg on each side of his neck and his arms up, holding the boy's hands. In this fashion he walked and trotted all over the farm, doing his chores as well. The boy was about 18 months old. The boy<sup>5</sup> was also given a horse whose name was Skimmel. Maband had to hold him on until he could balance. Of course, this treatment – together with using towels as nappies and being urged to walk too early – caused a little bandyleggedness that otherwise would not have been.

Maband became very fond of me. And as he only spoke Zulu, I soon learnt the Zulu language. In fact, in order that I understood them, both Harry and Eva also had to use Zulu with me. Harry was fluent but Eva had difficulty; so she used what was known as 'Kitchen Kaffir'. I soon got used to it. Then they started to talk to me in English and I slowly learnt English too.



**John Syme, probably Natal, c.  
1900**

I must have been a rather strange little boy. I seemed to have a great desire to dig holes in the ground. No doubt I had seen Maband dig holes for fencing posts and plants etc. But the spades were far too heavy for me. So the Boss<sup>6</sup> -- I always called Harry "Boss" as the farm Natives did -- bought me a light spade. Poor Maband now had a new job filling up the experimental holes dug by me. However, it was disappointing to have your pet holes filled up whenever Maband came along. So one day I slipped off, armed with the spade, to a field some distance from the house. Having selected a nice spot, I started digging a nice hole about three foot square. I went on digging and throwing up the spadefuls until I could not throw them high enough to clear the top. By this time I was tired too. So I thought to get out and call it a day, and return perhaps another day and dig deeper. But how was I to get out? I had seen Maband place a spade against the wall and use it as a step. But this did not work. I tried hard. Now I was frightened. I could not get out. I was getting hungry and very thirsty. So I sat in a corner of the hole and cried. As time went on and Maband had not seen me about and it was lunch time, the alarm was on. Maband walked around the house in circles. He knew

my habits. After walking round in larger and larger circles, he found what he was looking for – a shallow spade mark in the ground, and a little distance off, another one, and so on. It seems I, when walking with the spade, had stuck it in the ground after each few steps, somewhat like a walking stick. Maband followed the tracks until he could see a heap of new earth thrown up. A great laughing face appeared over the hole and I, forgetting my tears, was full of pride showing him the wonders of the hole I had dug. He stretched a hand down and lifted me from the hole and carried me home, spade and all. He then decided to run a light fence around the hole so that animals wouldn't fall into it and also to preserve it until I tired of it or had forgotten about it. Only then did he fill it in.

After a hard day's work on the farm, the natives, including Maband and me, would sit or squat around a large pot of mealie meal porridge. It was of a hardish consistency and at times had a little meat gravy stirred in. Using the little wooden spoon made for me by Maband, I would dip it into the pot to get a mouthful and join in the conversation. Of course, I had a native name too. It was Marewe – *marewe* being a drink made from mealie meal, thickish and slightly sour. It is quite refreshing but a rather acquired taste. I, however, was a glutton for it and hence my name.

On occasion I was taken to Boksburg as a treat in a two-horse Cape cart. The roads were mere wagon tracks across the veld. There was a peculiar thing that used to happen on this particular road. On one lovely stretch the undulating hills were mostly grass, but with clumps of bushes and some ant heaps dotted here and there. One of these clumps measured about 15 or 20 feet across and was situated about 20 yards from the straight road on the left-hand side when going to the farm. About a thousand yards before reaching it, the road branched in two, one going off to the right and bending about 1,000 yards out of the straight before curving back further on, so forming a D shape with the clump of bushes on the left of the straight side. When driving home and approaching the clump, the horses would begin to snort and shy and would not go on. I would get nervous and so remember the incident very clearly. It was not until the horses were allowed to take the road that veered off to the right away from the clump of bushes that they would go on. Once past, the horses then went like the wind. It has been said that something tragic had happened at this spot and that the horses, having an extra sense, were aware of it.

On one trip to Boksburg, the Boss bought some lovely very green sweets for me as a treat. As I seldom had sweets, I no doubt ate a good lot. I soon got a tummy ache and became very ill. It was thought that the sweets were poisonous. I remember being very ill in bed and being carried from one room to another. Then there was a big bang. What had happened was this. The bed was a cot-like affair with sides and netting over the top to keep flies off. Suddenly one of the farm dogs came in and started barking. The Missus came to see what the noise was about. She looked under the bed. There she saw a huge snake – most likely a ringhals [spitting cobra] or a mamba. She was a brave little woman. She calmly came up to the bed, lifted me up and carried me to another room. She then called the Boss. He quickly got his shotgun, but the snake had disappeared. The dog then started barking again, but in a different room. Again the snake was under the bed on which I had been put. The Boss shot it, hence the big bang I remember. I was taken back to my bed – and never forgot those green sweets.

A farmer's life in those days before the Boer War was not easy. I used to love to go into the mealie fields. It was like going into a forest, the mealie plants standing 6 or 8 feet high, green and lush with a good hope for a wonderful crop. Then one day the sky darkened to a brownish colour and soon down came swarms of millions and millions of hungry locusts. They covered everything like a blanket. The next day they took off again leaving only a few stragglers and fields of bare storks. Simply nothing edible was left. Some farmers might be lucky. If the locusts had had a good feed, they might pass over a farm and aim for some other poor farmer in their line of flight. Sometimes getting everyone to bang empty tins

would frighten them off. That's the kind of problem South African farmers faced in those days. Of course, I didn't know of the suffering and losses caused by locusts; in fact, I enjoyed chasing them, or hitting a tin and making them fly up in front of me only to settle again a few yards further on.

### **Boer War – 'the Boss' flees the South African Republic, 1899**

Then came talk of war.<sup>7</sup> The Boss was warned to clear out. After thinking about it and further warnings, he decided to go. A big hole was dug near the house and a lot of household things and farm implements were put into it. It was then covered with sheet iron from an old shed and soil over the top so as to remain hidden. Everything else, including a large cupboard, was loaded on a buckwagon drawn by a team of oxen. I and Eva, the Missus, were in the tent part of the wagon. At the back was the massive cupboard. The Boss, with a long whip fixed to a bamboo shaft, a native leading the oxen and another native walking at the side with a short stick, set off for the Johannesburg Railway. The going was very slow, about walking pace, and with many halts. Then a mishap happened. At one point the road, after going through a small donga, was fairly steep. On nearing the top, the trek chain suddenly broke, leaving only two oxen attached to the *disselboom*. The load was far too great for them to hold it. The wagon began to run backwards and off the road. For a moment it seemed there was no hope and that it would run down into the deep donga and overturn. Fortunately some large boulders halted it. But the sudden stop caused the large cupboard to rock and almost fall over. If it had, there would have been no escape for the Missus and me. It would most likely have killed us. As it was, another wagon going in the opposite direction stopped and lent a hand. By adding their span of oxen to the Boss's, they pulled the wagon back onto the road. After thanking them for their help and farewells, we went on to Johannesburg without further mishap.

After reaching the station, we found that a train would be leaving soon. As there were things to be done about the wagon and their effects, the Boss and the Missus could not go by this train. Some friends, however, were found to be on the train. The idea that the line might be cut or blown up at any time decided the Boss to send me on with these people. I was dumped on the woman's lap. There was no room to sit on a seat because the train was packed with people fleeing the Transvaal to the coast. The compartment was small and narrow, and had wooden seats for 16 or more people. It was so narrow that people's knees almost touched those opposite. In those days there were no corridor coaches.



**The train from Johannesburg to Durban passing Majuba, c. 1900 – John was travelling this very line a few months earlier**

The train made various stops and people were able to get out. I do not remember anything more than a carriage full of people, a rather yellow, varnished wall opposite, and that I was sitting on someone's lap next to an open window. Suddenly the compartment rocked and swayed violently. The next thing I was sitting on a grassy slope! And my next memory is of a sort of camp of tents with a fence and the railway line on the further side. The next thing I remember is the Boss and Missus coming and taking me away to a house where there was an Uncle and Aunt and several children. It appears that I was in the train that was involved in the Glencoe Disaster near Maritzburg. I had been thrown out of the window onto the grassy slope. And I must have been picked up and taken to the rescue camp. The Boss and the Missus must have hunted for me there.

The Boss had a brother, Fred, living in Maritzburg. So he, the Missus and I put up with them for the time being. I remember a few incidents there. For instance, a room or out-building – it may have been an old stable or coach-house – which had a new calico ceiling nailed to the rafters. I somehow remember the Missus was using a primus stove. It was the silent type. Something went wrong and it blazed up, the flame reaching higher and higher towards the calico ceiling. The Missus ran out in fright, but I picked up the primus and threw it outside almost under the Missus's flying dress. Luckily, the thing went out. But having got a good fright, I never forgot a silent Primus.

### **Life on the farm in Chase Valley near Pietermaritzburg**

The Boss hired a farm in the Chase Valley, a few miles out of Maritzburg. The house stood some distance from the road. There were lots of orange trees on the approach. And behind the house, there were a lot of loquat trees. Then vegetable lands and grass lands beyond. There was also a part covered with bush. The Boss had cows, horses, a milk cart, trolley ploughs etc. He took vegetables to the market and also fruit. Milk was supplied to the town. I often went with the milk cart and would return with all the empty bottles.

I was very happy on this farm. It was here that when I was out in the grass lands I spotted a secretary bird. I ran home, raided the pantry for a handful of salt (I had been told that, to catch a bird, I had to put salt on its tail) as I badly wanted a big bird like a secretary bird. Of course, the faster I walked after the bird, the faster it strode on. And the strides of the bird were rather longer than a little boy's! On they walked, the bird getting closer at times and then further away. Mile after mile until my legs ached and my handful of salt had melted into a wet mess. I eventually gave up the chase for want of any more salt and being very tired. I turned for home, but where was home? I was lost. I went on walking for some time and then sat down under a shady bush and promptly fell asleep. I must have slept for some time because I was missed at the farm. The natives were sent out to hunt for me. One young native remembered me hurrying in a certain direction and saying I was going to catch a big bird with salt. The natives now had a clue, since they knew the area where big birds were usually seen. After a considerable time hunting, they found me still walking home but in the wrong direction. I rode home on their shoulders telling them all about the salt!

The natives were fond of me as I could speak their language fluently and they were all Zulus. I often mixed with them in the evenings, ate with them, danced with them. I would hold their hands, stomping my feet with them and singing native tunes. They were kind and happy people, but primitive in many ways. If there was a quarrel amongst them, they would fight it out with sticks. Sometimes one would get past the guard of the other and land a blow on his head. Such a blow would most likely kill any white man. As it was, their hands and arms were usually hit many times, the blows sometimes causing large blood blisters and other wounds. The fight usually ended by the onlookers stopping it when they thought one had had enough.

I was happy playing about the farm and sometimes with the *umfaan*.<sup>8</sup> He was about my age. I had no white playmates up to this time. There was, however, a man called Carne Brokenshaw who came from Durban on visits and holidays on the farm. He was the eldest son of Frank and Ellen Brokenshaw, Ellen and Eva (the Missus) being sisters. So if the Missus was my mother, then Ellen would be my aunt and Carne my cousin. Carne was in the Durban Electricity Department and about 35 years old. He took an interest in me and became very fond of me. I, too, had a great fondness for this grown up cousin. He was a most kind, attentive and friendly man, apart from being the very best of men. Any man who followed his example could never go wrong.

Carne used to bring me presents from time to time. Once he brought a No. 3 airgun and showed me how to use it. I had a great time shooting rats running along the rafters in the cow shed and stables. I also had fun shooting huge fruit bats which used to demolish a large quantity of fruit each year. One very large one was taken away and stuffed; I believe it was sent to England to a museum. Carne also brought me a tricycle for my birthday. What a thrill to wake up in the early morning and see the unbelievable shiny machine in the middle of my bedroom. My happiness was without bounds and Carne shared in it by being an observer of my excited antics – making too sharp a turn here and taking a tumble there. On another occasion, the present he gave me was a pocket knife and rubber bands. He proceeded to make a catapult – and showed me step by step how to select a good prong, fit the tapes, and cut out a leather loop. And then he demonstrated how to use it.

Carne used to give me odd coins sometimes too. But I did not find money very interesting – mostly I would take the coins to the house and give them to the Missus who would pop them into a wooden money box which I was given. This money box caused a bit of trouble. A passing native had a bundle of *mabela* [sorghum] stalks. The *mabela* stalk is a bad likeness to sugarcane, but is reasonably sweet to

chew the juice out of. Seeing the native walking by, I asked him for a stalk. He said he would give me the whole bundle in exchange for money. I said I would get some and ran home. But I couldn't get the coins out of the slot. So I opened my pocket knife and prized the bottom open and poured out the handful of coins. I ran back and gave them all to the native, who handed me the bundle of stalks. He proceeded on his way and I went home to have a feed. But after chewing just a small piece and sucking it dry, I had had enough. So I left the rest of the stalks for another day. In the meantime the Missus discovered the broken money box. I was hauled in to explain the terrible happening. It seems that a 3d. would have been enough to pay for the *mabela* stalks and there must have been 10/- in the box! So I learnt that there were bad natives as well as good ones, and that money must never be given until you are grown up. Also that it's a terrible thing to break into your own money box and take out all the cash.

Whenever Carne came, I would show him the latest beautiful hole I had dug. One hole was a round one and rather deeper than usual. Carne made a wooden top with a hinge flap which could be closed to prevent animals from falling in. It was safe for the *umfaan* to stand astride it and pull up the bucket, and also for me to climb up the rope to get out. As a result, this work went on whenever I could get hold of the *umfaan*. No doubt he dodged me as it was hard work pulling up a bucket from so deep a hole. It must have been about 15 or 20 feet. The Boss, thinking it a bit dangerous, decided to make good use of it. So one day when I was out hunting in the bush, he got the natives to move the lav. over the hole. In those days it was usual to have a galvanized iron affair with a seat and door parked over a hole, and when this was full, another hole would be dug and the lav. moved. The next time I went to dig my beautiful hole, I found the lav. over it. Gosh! It disgusted me that I had so much trouble. They always filled up my holes and now my best hole! That was just too much.

There was a lovely gate at the entrance to the farm from the main road. It was an iron one, very long, and would swing from the full open position past the heavy wooden gate post and out the other way. Backwards and forwards it would swing until it came to rest in line with the post, where a wire loop could hold it shut. This was a lovely gate to play trains on. You could push the gate open as far as it would go, then run back near the post and jump on as it swung past. One day, however, a misjudgment happened and my head got caught between the gate post and the iron gate. I ran all the way home howling blue murder. I arrived at the house with blood all over, a really terrible sight. I was taken in hand at once and my head bathed with cold water. The damage luckily was not serious, and things mended quite soon.

One day I went out shooting with my catapult and spotted a bird in a tree near a neighbour's house on the other side of the main road. The land sloped down towards the house. On the upper side where I stood was a large *sloot* which carried the water away when it rained to protect the road. I let drive with a stone from the catapult. The stone missed the bird but went through the farmhouse window below with a splintering of glass. The farmer rushed out with a double-barreled shotgun and fired, BANG, BANG. I ducked and ran unseen along the *sloot* as I had never run before. To be scolded was one thing, but to be shot at was just the last straw. After running until I was out of breath, I stopped and felt myself all over to see if I was hit. I never went to that side of the farm again! When Carne visited again, he had a good laugh when told of the shooting incident.

It was about this time that Carne spoke of boys growing up, going to school and learning all sorts of wonderful things like being able to read books and stories – and having holidays. The result was that I was taken to town to a boarding school. But after a time I decided I did not like school. So I just packed my bag and walked out when no one was looking. I knew the way home even though it was a number of miles away. After clearing the town, I kept off the road in case I should be caught. After going some



distance, I saw a large red brick building. It was a lunatic asylum. I had heard all sorts of stories from the natives about mad people and so was scared to be in the area. There were also some paddocks in my line of flight with cattle in them. I had to go through them unless I risked the road. I was scared of bulls, having been told stories about them. So I cleared the area as fast as my legs would take me. At last I arrived home, all dirty, dusty and much to the surprise of the Missus. She was kind, however, and did not scold me much.

After a few days it was arranged for me to go and stay with the Boss's brother's family. They had a boy much the same age as me, but rather frail and thin, as well as younger brothers and sisters. Compared with these children I was suntanned and strong. The arrangement was that I went to school as a day boy. This was better, but I was still not happy as my cousins were spoilt and I was not allowed to play with them! And when they were given things like toy fire engines, they played with them while I was told to sit in the corner and watch the fun. This affected me. I could not understand it. Also I was watched at all times while I was in the house. If I had a bath, I was seen to the bathroom. If I went to the lav, someone watched me go in and come out. I was always kept away from the other children. I got no affection or care; I was simply packed off to school with just bread and jam to eat.

This went on for some time. It was clear that these narrow-minded people were convinced that I was most likely born on the wrong side of the blanket and would contaminate their own children. A child can sense something wrong causing it to be unhappy even if it is something rather difficult to explain. I knew that my clothes were rather shabby and I usually had holes in my shoes. But that did not explain it all. At school I was reluctant to make many friends in case they acted in a similar way. One is likely to remember this kind of treatment all one's life unless one finds the answer and realizes that it is the stupid narrow-mindedness of someone [rather than some fault of one's own].

### **Another new start – Life in Potchefstroom, 1903**

Fortunately it was not very long before the Boer War ended. The Boss and his wife had made a failure of the Chase Valley farm and all his money was gone. His farm in the Transvaal had been wrecked and everything destroyed. There was no chance of going back if one had no money. It was possible that the British Government would pay compensation, but likely not for a long time, if ever. He was now on his beam ends. Having scanned the newspaper ads, he applied for the post as manager at a hotel in Potchefstroom. Was an English-speaker preferred because a large number of British troops were stationed on the outskirts of the town and made use of the Railway Hotel? Anyway, he got the post. So he, his wife and I left Maritzburg by train. We arrived in Potchefstroom where we were met by the usual horse-drawn hotel bus. The hotel was situated near the centre on the south side of Church Square. This square was always used for *Nagmaal*<sup>9</sup> and many wagons used to arrive – with the women in *kappies*, men in corduroy trousers, *veldskoens* and broad felt hats, and the children always in their best. After a fairly short time of church services etc., they would inspan and all disappear again.

After settling down in the hotel I got into the habit of crossing the square, entering the main shopping area and looking for someone on horseback for whom I would offer to hold his horse while the rider went into a shop or did some business. He would give you a threepence, or sixpence if you are lucky. This would buy sweets or whatever. But holding horses was a nerve-racking business at first, even if one gets used to it quite soon.

The Boss and the Missus did not like the job in the hotel. He, being a teetotaler, could not cooperate in the matter of drinking. I also disliked this hotel life. It was dreadful to see all the soldiers come into the bar when there would be swearing, drinking, fighting and getting drunk. I was afraid of drinkers and disliked them very much. One night while I was crossing the square, I was grabbed at by a drunken soldier but managed to escape. As a result, I took a violent dislike to the British uniform. There was a young Coloured man who worked for the hotel, mostly in the yard. He was fairly tall and thin but had tough muscles. He was a quiet man when sober, but with a few drinks one could get him to do anything. So I used to pour the dregs of empty bottles into one bottle, and also any dregs from glasses. When I had collected enough, I would give it to this boy in the evening when he was off duty. As soon as the drink had taken its effect, I would take him by the hand and hunt for any soldier lying in the grass near the cypress trees growing by the church. I would then give him a heavy stick and tell him to hit the soldier. We would then both run off and enter the hotel grounds from the back. I would get the Coloured boy into his room with instructions to go to sleep and not come out again, or else he would not get any more drink. This happened a number of times. A soldier could not always be found, of course, but it was exciting looking for them. No doubt they had been warned of these attacks. The reason for these men being there in the square is anybody's guess, but I would say they were sleeping it off.

It was not long before I was put to school again. This time it was an English convent – divided into one half for girls and the other for boys. This was done by dividing the buildings down the middle, so one never saw a girl. Mother Norah was the Mother Superior and Father McCarthy the priest. It was the Convent of the Sacred Heart. The sisters were kind, firm and gentle. I had the greatest respect and love for them even though I hated school work. It was the first time I began to realize that religion played an important part in life. I had been used so far to open spaces, the bush and a wild sort of life, also rather a lonely life. But I had often longed for a brother or sister, being rather a retiring boy. Though I was friendly with everyone, and played pranks as any average boy did, I was quiet and shy. I was very tall, rather thin, but strong and tough for my age, most likely due to the wild life.<sup>10</sup> I was very backward in school work and so was put in classes with much younger boys. School work was very, very heavy going. I hated bullies. If I could not beat them, I resorted to setting traps for them as I would for animals. They would get a note to say that if they did not stop, the worst would happen to them.

### **The little girl called Nancy**

It was not long before the Boss left the hotel. He got a mud brick house in the southern end of the town. It was in the same street as the school but at the other end – perhaps a mile away and it meant a rather longer walk. Next door lived Mr and Mrs Pakes. They had a little girl called Nancy, who went to the same school. The families became good friends. Mr Pakes had a butchers shop. They were English, he being a pugilist by profession. All sorts of people came to South Africa in those days, all hoping to make their fortunes in a new country. Nancy became like a little sister to me. We would play in the rather large area behind the house which was bordered by a fig tree hedge. There were also peach, pear and other fruit trees.

Nancy was not allowed to mix with the Boer people and their children. I, by contrast, ran around all over the place. There was a concentration camp<sup>11</sup> opposite the house. I soon got to know the people there and quickly picked up the *Taal* [Afrikaans]. I got to speaking it quite fluently and knew most of the Boer families in the area. I used to have meals with them. The grown-ups were always kindly and shared anything they had. My clothing was rather more shabby than the average child, except the girls



were always better dressed. I did not like girls. Nancy was different. She was rather shy, well dressed, pretty and refined, and took the place of a sister for me.

The Boer boys were usually in rags except for a Sunday suit for church. I had a best suit too; but this was worn only for school. My clothes were cast offs sent from the Brokenshaw family. They had to be altered a bit. Shoes were a difficulty. They could only be worn to school and had to be taken off as soon as I got home. So I spent the rest of my time barefoot. In that respect, however, I was like all the other children as no one in our part of the town was well off.

### **Boers and Brits -- the concentration camp opposite**

The women and children in the camp opposite were, I think, actually the best off. It is strange how so many different stories have been told of the so-called dreadful concentration camps. This camp was not a very large one. It had a number of Bell tents on one side of a field. On the other side, some distance away, were some slit trenches with sacking or canvas shielding. They were to be used as a latrine. The trenches had been dug by British soldiers – redcoats or *rooi baadjies*. There was quite a hatred of the British soldiers by these women, largely because some of them had lost their husbands, sons or lovers in the War. Their attitude was quite understandable in the circumstances. But unfortunately it was carried too far. For instance, because the redcoats had dug the trenches, the Boers would not use them. The result was a serious outbreak of enteric fever.



**Women and children in a Boer War concentration camp**

I also contracted it and nearly died. I was attended by a doctor, but the treatment was mostly starvation with no solids. After a time my temperature got back to normal. The doctor arrived one evening having been to the races or something. He had had rather too much to drink. Whether he read the thermometer correctly or not I don't know, but he ordered that I could now have bread and

butter and a boiled egg. I had a mouthful or two, but it tasted so bad I refused any more. The next morning I had a very high temperature again and was delirious. I saw strange things like my friends hiding behind a clock. I had recently joined the cadets but had not got my uniform yet. I had all sorts of hallucinations about this. The doctor was sent for again, but he was out of town. So another one came. He was quite different. He was a lean quiet man who inspired confidence, whereas the other one was a corpulent, pompous type who seemed to have his knowledge in the wrong place, along perhaps with his drink. If you take an interest in doctors, you will find that most good doctors are lean men. Anyway, I soon got better and after a time was allowed up. All my skin had peeled off and most of my hair had

fallen out. I was so weak I could not walk and had to be helped. However I soon regained my feet and recovered my full strength.

In the meantime the medical officers from the cantonment visited the camp and insisted that the latrines be used or the inmates dig their own. This they did and the enteric fever was wiped out.

As for the women and children in the concentration camp being better off, this was due largely to the supplies of food from the British Government. It came on wagons drawn by teams of mules. There was so much food that, soon after the wagons left, carts, trolleys, and vehicles of all descriptions would arrive from all over.<sup>12</sup> There would be much bartering and buying of food, the camp keeping only what they needed. To say they were starved would be stupid. And who in the circumstances would not take advantage of all this free food? After all, these people were not as green-as-cabbage looking. They had lost the War but were determined to get as much as they could out of it. They thought the British were stupid. But the British were not, at least not in this respect. After all, what was a little extra food supply compared to the cost of a war?

I heard many stories from the Boers who had fought the British. I often laughed at the foolish and mad way the British had conducted the war. One of the things often spoken of was how the British officers wore helmets with plumes flying in the wind, all ready to be picked off by some Boer sharpshooter behind a rock. Also, the startling colour of the redcoats' uniforms could be seen for miles. The Boers, on the other hand, could not be seen at all because they melted into the surroundings. There were many other mistakes made by the British, too, which were well known to the Boers. The average Boer did not really hate the British. I was even told of cases where a Boer who had been seriously wounded would be put by his pals directly in the line of march of a British column and they would watch from surrounding kopjes until they saw the wounded man picked up. They would know then he was safe and would get the best of treatment by the British Army medical corps.

The Boers who had actually fought in the war said that, if the British had not been so stupid, it would have ended almost before it started. In particular, if the English had had no concentration camps for women and children, the Boer farmers would never have left their families on the farms for long because of their fear the Kaffirs would murder them. Also the British commanders should have known the country better and equipped their soldiers with more suitable uniforms.

It was surprising how well the people got on with the Army in a town like Potchefstroom. There was little hard feeling. And considering the large number of troops stationed there, there was very little trouble. I only knew of one incident. It happened when a soldier was walking past a house in which a youngish Boer woman who had lost her sweetheart in the war lived. The man had seen a lot of fowls in the yard. So he went to the front door to ask to buy some eggs. The woman, seeing a British soldier in front of her, promptly spat in his face. He was somewhat quick of temper and stuck his bayonet through her cheeks. He was court-martialed and she had a nasty scar. The British Government was not unwise and did not want trouble.

I and some of my playmates used to go to a particular place on the fringes of the town near the soldiers' camp. Four or five houses stood there in a row. We would hide in a shallow trench some distance off and watch. We were interested to see women coming out and going for occasional walks – two, four, sometimes even six at a time. They were French women sent out by the British Government and taken care of by the British Army's medical people.<sup>13</sup> Boys will be boys, however, and we were spotted by a

man who had a fruit orchard opposite. He had lost some fruit, and this area became out-of-bounds for us boys.

Potchefstroom was a town where there was lots of water. It flowed down the furrows at the sides of the streets. There was also a canal with lots of small fish, including quite large barbell, in it. I and my friends used to fish using bent pins as hooks and fry what we caught.

In the holidays I used to go into the veld. The road passed a beautiful Government Experimental Farm. It was supplied with water by a wide canal. Beyond it was a railway crossing (the railway to Klerksdorp and Kimberley) and then the bare veld, although further out there were thorn and berry bushes. And beyond there were high hills or mountains. One of these was an unusual shape – *spitzkop* – something like a Chinaman's hat.

I spent lots of time in the veld. There had been quite a lot of fighting in this area. There were old trenches with mounds thrown up on one side. We boys dug in these mounds looking for spent bullets. Thousands of them could be found. A bullet cut into two made a wonderful slug for a catapult. Sometimes we also found live shells and cartridges. We would prize out the bullets and remove the cordite. This was great for etching your name on your felt hat. You bent sticks into the shapes of letters; lay them on the hat; and then set fire to one end. The flame would fizzle along the sticks and leave a burnt impression of the writing. On one occasion we unearthed a buried store of condensed milk. The milk was rusty brown in colour and rather hard. How we boys did not get poisoned is a mystery. But it was a great game.

We also used to collect firewood and sacks full of dry cow dung, and sell it for fires. In this way a little money could be earned. I had started to smoke cigarettes by this time, a habit I had learnt from the other boys. Flag was the favorite, costing threepence for a packet of ten. There was not much smoking, however, as money was difficult to come by. Some small farmers grew tobacco locally. We boys would turn the handle of a sort of chaff-cutting machine and pack the tobacco into bags. The farmer would give us a couple of handfuls of tobacco for the service. As for pipes, we made them out of reeds growing in the vlei.

The vlei was a great place to hunt for wild ducks eggs which you could eat if fresh. In parts of the vlei there was a rather tough, hard clay. The boys would take this and pick sides for a battle. The lanes round about usually had mud walls and hedges of quince trees to prevent animals – both the two-legged and four-legged kind – from raiding the gardens. Quince sticks are very strong and flexible. What you do is take a bit of clay in the palm of your hand and wrap it around the quince switch at the thin end, shaping it like a torpedo. If then you give it a good strong flick, the clay flies off and whistles through the air at a considerable speed and distance. Of course, you can never be sure where the missile is going to go. Anyway, if you are fifty yards from your aim, you are doing fine, and if you hit another boy who has got in the way, then you are even luckier. To be hit is no joke. It stings like the devil and leaves a red patch and sometimes removes the skin. But it's great fun.

I was always on the lookout to earn money. One day a Boer woman said she wanted a well. Gosh! This was just the thing. No one could tell me about digging holes. So I took on the job for 5/-. I got a couple of my pals and offered them a share. We started and all went well down to a couple of feet. The ground was soft clay and wettish. However the deeper we went, the more the sides fell in until we had a huge cone-shaped cavity. The woman, seeing this terrible sight in her backyard, paid me and cleared the lot of us off. She then got some natives to fill it in again. So the hole business was off!

The Boers were good people in spite of the fact that they could not read or write. I never met one who could. What people did if they needed to was this. There were offices here and there, usually run by a Hollander. A man wishing to write to his brother would go to the Hollander and tell him what he wanted to say. The Hollander would write it in Nederlands [Dutch] and address it to the brother. The brother, on getting it, would go to another Hollander and have it read and transcribed into the *Taal* [Afrikaans]. The usual fee was 1/- without the stamp. Of course, a lot of communication was simply done by word of mouth. And people travelled long distances on horseback. It was wonderful how news got about. They were a wonderful people.

The Boss eventually got some meagre compensation from the British Government for the loss of his farm and effects in the Transvaal. The money received was the cause of his leaving the hotel. He had in the meantime heard that there was a chance to start brick making. There was talk of a town hall being built and he thought he had a good chance of getting the contract to supply the bricks. So he bought a new Pugmill and other equipment and made a start. He looked like being well away. He had a good education and had the latest designs. After a considerable time spent preparing and burning the bricks in kilns and building up a stock, however, something went wrong. He was in competition with others and they did not like him. Somehow or other, the kiln vents had been blocked up. Loads of bricks were destroyed as a result and he was ruined. Others got the contracts and shared them out. Nothing could be proved as to who had done it. But there was no money to fight a court case; so he was out.

### 3. Life as a digger on the Vaal

#### Going diamond mining at Christiana

About this time Carne had fallen in love with a girl, but she jilted him. He was so badly upset that he wanted to get away from Durban. There was a lot of talk of fortunes to be made on the alluvial diamond fields.<sup>14</sup> It happened also that Ethelbert Cowie, who was much the same as Carne in age, was taking a year's leave from India. Eva – the Missus – was his sister. It was arranged that they would all join in this new venture. The Missus would do the cooking and housework. The Boss would help do the actual work of sifting soil for diamonds, and I would do so too. Carne and Ethelbert would do all the financing and work as well. They agreed all to meet up at Christiana on the Vaal River on the Transvaal side (the other side being the Free State).

The move from Potchefstroom was arranged. The Boss and the Missus would go by train and I with the wagon.<sup>15</sup> All the household effects were loaded on to it. A middle-aged Boer was hired and a Coloured, a Hottentot and a Native who was about 20 years old. We started off with a span of 16 donkeys. The going was not too bad the first two days although it was slow, never more than a good walking pace and mostly rather less. The road was just a track and very sandy in parts. One great difficulty was water. Mostly we got it from brak pans;<sup>16</sup> it wasn't pleasant, but when one is really thirsty anything wet is not too bad. The poor donkeys, however, suffered badly.

The usual procedure was to inspan at about 5 a.m. and carry on to about 11; then outspan and let the donkeys feed, rest and avoid the worst heat of the sun; and then inspan again after 2 p.m. and go on with lots of rests to about 6 or 7 just before dark. At night a sail or canvas was put over the wagon. It reached down to the ground, and was anchored by a few stones. We slept under the wagon – this one not being the tent type. It was loaded forward with a small space at the back where wood and cow dung were stacked. This fuel was picked up from the veld as we went along, although sometimes you had to go quite far afield to get it. It served to cook food and keep wild animals away at night. It was not a comfortable feeling if you didn't have enough to last the night. We avoided lion country and where there was bush or dongas. The more open ground was best for camping.

I was a bit scared by the stories told. Nothing happened, however, except for the trials of the trek. The donkeys were getting tired and their progress became slower and slower. The road often followed the railway line. We always had to be on the lookout for trains because the donkeys might stray on to the line, the fences along it often being broken down. One night, on hearing a train in the distance, the men went out to see where the donkeys were. To their horror they found some of them on the line. But before they could get to them, the train came. Donkeys are very stupid. They ran along the line and four of them got killed. Progress now was even slower with only twelve donkeys left. Nothing further went wrong and we arrived eventually at the meeting place.

Equipment had been purchased. Together with the Boss, the Missus, Carne, Ethelbert and me, it was all deposited on the side of a hill overlooking the river which, at that time of year, had no water in it. Setting up camp began without delay. We pitched a medium-sized marquee tent, a Bell tent and a square tent with flaps. Also a frame house with a canvas covering and a patch of sheet iron through which a stove pipe went. This was where the food was cooked. It also served as a dining room and where all the stores were kept. I slept on the floor of the marquee where Carne and Ethelbert slept on

stretchers. Later on, I was transferred to the bell tent and also given a stretcher. The Boss and the Missus slept in the square tent. The Boss's stretcher was a strong homemade affair and had heavy canvas nailed to the side rails. It was over two feet high. He was a corpulent man and very heavy.

### **How alluvial mining on the Vaal was done**

The camp being complete, work started without delay. A chain was pegged in the river bed where it was thought there might be diamonds,<sup>17</sup> and digging began. The process was first to remove any large boulders where you were about to dig. Then with a pick and shovel you loosened the gravel and stones. The larger stones were thrown to one side. The finer gravel with sand and little stones was placed in a heap. They were then loaded into a bucket and emptied into a sieve on the 'Baby'. The 'Baby' was a swinging cradle comprising a six foot long fine sieve fixed to a frame with a chute at one end. This could swing on four chains which are attached to a frame with four upright posts. The chute end was slightly lower than the other end. At the opposite end to the chute was a removable, circular, coarse mesh sieve mounted over the long, fine mesh sieve. The procedure was to empty the bucket full of gravel (including sand and stones) into the coarse sieve. Then one person would rock the long sieve with the coarse sieve on it while another person poured a bucket of water slowly over the coarse sieve. Once the material in the round sieve has been washed, one could see at once if a large diamond was there. The rest of the gravel and sand which had passed through the coarse sieve was now in the long fine sieve, the remaining gravel slowly reaching the chute and falling into a half barrel or tub. (Hence 'Rocking the Baby'.)



When the tub was full, a new process began. One put about half a bucketful of the finer gravel from the tub into another round sieve with a fine mesh. These sieves were about 18 inches in diameter. The



sieve was then taken to another half barrel or tub which was bigger in diameter than the sieve and filled nearly full of water. You then gripped the sieve firmly and immersed it in the water. By an up and down movement and a slight twist, the gravel was made to bounce in the water and at the same time rotate slowly. This was called gravitating. The idea was that a diamond, being the heaviest of all stones, would sink to the bottom. The bouncing movement would allow free movement of a diamond past the gravel, and the rotating movement would gravitate it to the middle of the sieve. Should there be a diamond, you could expect it to be in the middle somewhere and at the bottom.

The next step was the sorting table. This usually consisted of a heap of sand or gravel and covered with a sack. You approached the sorting table and swung the sieve upside down on to the sacking without disturbing the gravel. Then removed the sieve, leaving the gravel resting on the sack, bottom uppermost. Any diamond in the sieve would be seen at once roundabout the middle of the pile. Gravitating can be a fine art. A good gravitator can turn a sieve without hardly disturbing a stone in it. He also can be a very dangerous man to employ if dishonest. So he has to be watched all the time because he can hide any diamond he sees in an instant.<sup>18</sup>

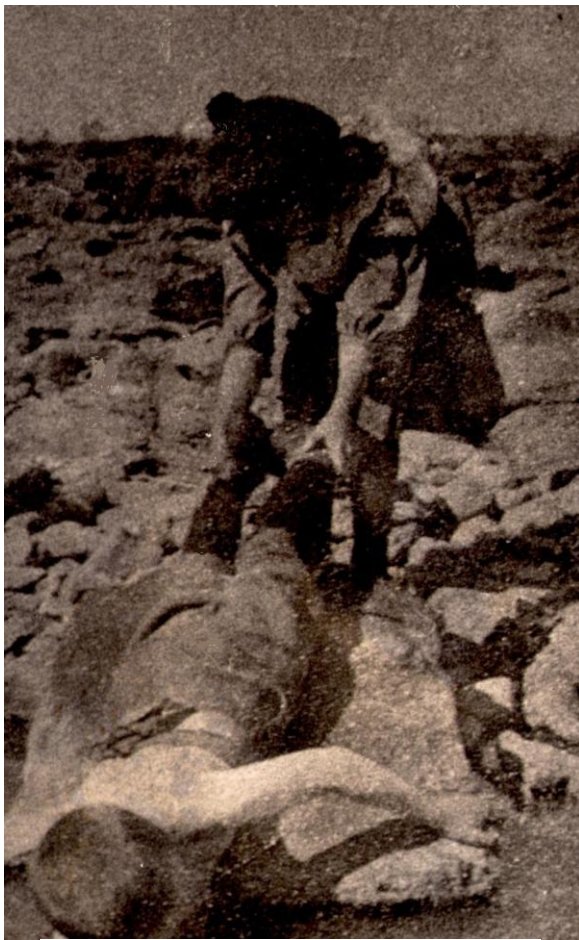


### The work begins

So the work began in earnest. The Boss was ageing rapidly and had a lot of trouble with his back and easily got out of breath. But he was always there working. Carne and I felt sorry for him. So when he had anything heavy to move, one of us helped him. And as gravitating was a back-breaking job, Carne and I did it all, with the Boss being given the lighter jobs to do, such as going to town to buy things, getting the post, and so on. He was a good man and tried hard to do his share. You could see that he was a broken man, but still trying to do his best. He never showed people any affection but he was kind. He never gave any strict orders to me or his wife. And I never heard a cross word. She was a small

woman, rather frail, small boned and refined. He, too, was refined and never used strong language. But it was she and Carne who were bothered about my not being at school, not the Boss. As for Ethelbert, he was never cut out for hard manual work. He was soft and completely stupid with a pick and shovel. He worked quite as hard as any of us, but what he accomplished was little better than nothing. He was a nice man too, but would have done much better with a pen.

About this time Mr and Mrs Pakes and Nancy also turned up from Potchefstroom. No doubt the Boss and the Missus had written to them. I was delighted to have my little pal again. I showed her all the wonders of looking for diamonds. I taught her to gravitate. Nancy and I went all over the place, looking for pretty stones, trapping birds etc. Nancy had to wash the clothes in the river on Saturdays and I would go fishing in a nearby pool. One day there was a disturbance. Nancy was yelling that she had lost the soap in the pool. I rushed to the rescue and could see the soap just beyond a large sloping rock which Nancy was using as a wash table. I saw that if I could lie on the rock and slide down, I might just reach it. So off came my shirt. Nancy hung on to my feet and slid me down until my nose was almost in the water and I was able to rescue the soap.



**Nancy holding on to John's legs as he tries to recover the soap, Vaal River diggings**

So life went on with hard work, a little play and some adventures – but no diamonds. One day the mounted police arrived and warned everyone working down the banks of the river to get all their things out and on to high ground – and to keep all animals out of the riverbed – as the river was coming down in *sput* and would reach this part in a day or so. We all worked to get the gear out. Diggers helped each other once they had got their own stuff out. In a day everything was out. We then only had to watch that the animals did not stray. The next night there was a rumble and a roar, but nothing could be seen as it was dark. Early next morning was a most wonderful sight. There, from bank to bank, was a rushing torrent of yellowish brown muddy water. The higher ground with trees and reeds were now islands. Dead animals of all sorts were floating down; no doubt they had been caught in the river further up.

This flood meant that the digging season in most of the riverbed was over. After the first flush, the water level dropped and the river ran at an even flow. Fishing was often good in the deep pools. The river in fact was now full of quite nice large fish. The yellow fish is one of the largest. There were also lots of barbell. These grow to enormous sizes. Some people eat them, but usually only at certain seasons because at other times of the year they have worms in the flesh down the back.





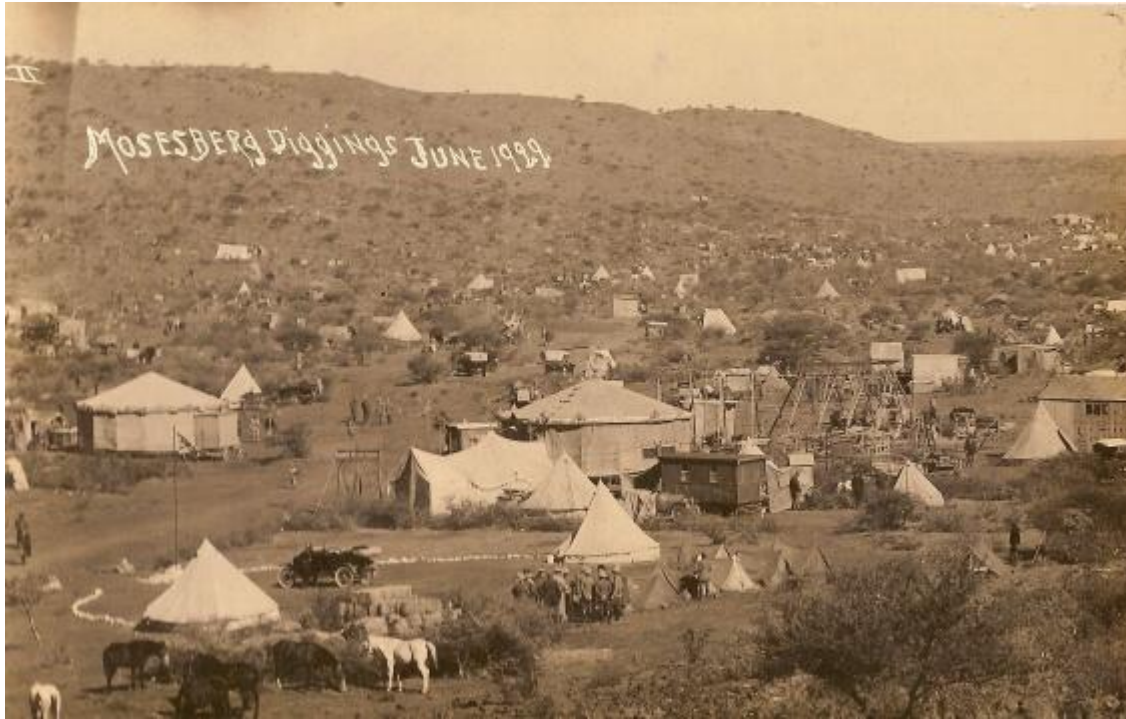
**John fishing on the Vaal  
River near Christiana,  
early 1900s**

It was still possible to dig for diamonds during the off-season in parts of the river. Claims were chosen where it was wide and shallow (just a couple of feet deep) and where the current was running slowly. You can build a sort of breakwater or dyke, extending out from the bank a little way and enclosing part of your claim. The dyke is built of sods from the bank and has to be about a foot above the water in case the river should rise a little. You then have to pump the water out and work proceeds in the way I have explained. But most diggers could not afford an expensive pump in those days. If someone did have a pump at all, it was usually a manual device called a Californian pump. This involved having two flooring boards, say 20 ft. long and 6" wide, formed into a long box by nailing on two side pieces of the same length. You then had a rectangular hole through the tube-like box. One end was fitted with a roller, something like a rolling pin. The other end has a largish wooden drum, a long length of heavy canvas of a width to fit the box and long enough to go through it, over the roller and over the drum which has handles for turning. Wooden paddles were made to be an easy fit to the rectangle of the box and screwed to the canvas belt, spaced about 8" or 10" apart. The roller end was put into the water and on turning the handle, each paddle scooped up a quantity of water and so you had a Californian pump.

#### **Moving up-river to a new claim**

After a few months of this type of digging, Carne and Ethelbert had to depart to go back to their jobs. They left all the equipment and a little money with the Boss and the Missus so that they could carry on. The Boss decided to move further up the river where it was said to be richer in diamonds. Again a wagon was hired and the camp and equipment loaded. We crossed to the Free State side at the Christiana drift where the river was only about two feet deep and very wide. A day's journey brought us to the new site and camp was pitched again. Mr and Mrs Pakes and Nancy were already there. The site was near a very high bank, about 30 feet above the water and 50 feet from the edge. The main reason for selecting this spot was that a number of very large willow trees grew there and offered a good wind brake and shade.

The camp was much the same as the first one except that the canvas-covered frame house was a little longer. The marquee tent had been sold and the Bell tent had been blown to ribbons in a dust storm which were frequent in these parts. So the flap tent was now joined to the end of the frame house. This is where the Boss and Missus slept. I had my stretcher at the opposite end of the frame house in the corner. It was built long ways to the river. Outside the front door was a berry bush which was often used for drying the washing. The lav. arrangements were the usual slit trench shielded by sacking, one for men and one for women. All the different camps were dotted about in no special order. Tents of all sorts and conditions were to be found. Some prospectors actually had tin sheds about 12 ft. square; a few had a galvanized iron room as home.



**Another South African diamond rush, this one about 15 years after John's experiences on the Vaal River**

The river was very beautiful here. The Boss's camp was at the lower end of a huge pool. This was about a mile long, a quarter of a mile wide, and very deep. The current was slow moving owing to the mass of water. And at the lower end the river divided into two large streams. The Free State one became more and more shallow until it seemed to go over a rise and down the other side where there was a swift rapid. On the Transvaal side, there was a thundering heavy rapid. But between the two streams were a series of lovely high islands, heavily wooded and with all sorts of birds and animals. These included guineafowl, rabbits, plenty of snakes and iguanas. The latter are a large lizard-type of reptile, growing to about 3 foot or even longer. There were numerous birds including the large wood pigeon. Geese and wild duck were also plentiful – most of the islands were fringed with reeds and willow trees.

The upper reaches of the pool were also very beautiful, but here the river narrowed a bit and the two streams which were divided by islands were much deeper and very swift running from small pool to pool. It was an awesome sight to see this endless mass of water rushing over the deep uneven rocky bottom with here and there a huge black rock sticking out and causing whirlpools, unexpected currents

in the up-river direction, and waves rearing up. The banks were lined with shivering reeds. Here the water was swift, but calmer, causing the reeds to vibrate. The islands were teeming with wild life, but were difficult to get on to. The first island lay at the head of the large pool and had huge sand spit at one end. When the river was low, it was uncovered. Masses of snipe could be found there and it was also a lovely part to bathe as there was no mud.

The country round about was fairly barren. There were rocky outcrops, plain veld with bush here and there, and low hills. These had a varying depth of diamondiferous gravel. A lot of diggers worked there during the time while the river was in flood.

### **Keeping body and soul together**

The boss and I had a claim in the river bed a little lower down where it was shallower. We built a small dyke and there we worked. But the Boss was getting old and could not stand up too much hard work. However he did his best. Sometimes he would also go out with his double-barreled shotgun when meat was scarce. But walking long distances over rough country was also rather much for him. So I would go instead, and it was not often that I came back without some game. The gun was a 12 bore double choke, made by Greeners in England. It had a kick like a horse. So, being still a young boy, I would open the ends of the cartridges and reduce the charge of shot, thereby reducing the kick. But I had to be careful not to waste shot as cartridges cost money.

I set all sorts of traps for food too. There were numbers of spring hares about. They were good to eat. The hare looks like a kangaroo, is bigger than a large rabbit, and has powerful, long hind legs and short front legs. It hops at quite a high speed. It lives in a burrow and comes out at night. After entering its burrow it blocks the entrance, so one knows when it's at home.

Nancy and I knew the whole area. She used to dig for worms and in the evenings the two of us would fish. If you wanted fish, you had to catch it. You couldn't buy it. In addition to fishing with lines and rods made of reeds, we set night lines. These consisted of a length of heavy fishing line with a number of baited hooks dangling a couple of feet apart. A heavy stone would be attached as a sinker to the end of the line to anchor it. About ten feet from it would be a float holding up the line with its hooks in the water, and the shore end would be tied firmly to a tree or stake. Early the following morning we would feel the line. If nothing wriggled, we left it in place until the evening and then bated it again. If, however, anything was caught, we would draw the line out, take off the fish, and set it again if we had any fresh bait left.

I knew every digger in the area. Most were a rough crowd. But among them were poor but gentle folk. They were miners and people of all classes. One thing they had in common was they were all poor and hoping to make a fortune. Being all in the same boat, they were friendly and helpful to each other. In fact, it could be dangerous to be wealthy in such a place.

The best house in the camps was a wood and iron room about 12 ft. square. This belonged to the Sommerlese brothers. The four of them had been digging for diamonds for over ten years but were still poor. The usual price to hire a digger for special jobs, such as completing the wash, was 4/- a day. There were always plenty of men available. 4/- would keep a man for a week. The Summerlese brothers often took on these jobs.

Diggers were mostly tough people. There were very few women on the diamond fields except a few wives and daughters.

There was one man whom I liked. He was a tall Irishman. He had a bell tent which was set over a hole about 2 feet deep, the idea being that he could get a bit more headroom in the tent. He suffered very badly from asthma which he would try to alleviate by smoking a sort of paper cigarette, inhaling the fumes or something. His tent was on my way to work. When he had a bad attack, I would call in, make him some food, clean out the tent etc. On my return in the evening, I would do the same. The man could hardly move during some of his bad attacks, though at other times he was quite alright except for wheezing now and again.

### **The Boss dies – strange happenings and premonitions**

One day when I was about to go to work, the Boss came along with a bundle of letters. (It was a custom on the fields for people to take turns to collect the post from all around the camp and give them to the post boy to take to town.) On this particular morning, just as the Boss was in line with the bush in front of our tent and within 3 feet of me, he suddenly threw up his arms and fell to the ground. He was dead. I called the Missus and she lifted his head on to her lap while I got a couple of diggers nearby who helped carry him and lay him on his stretcher. He was buried a day or two later. The Missus did not cry very much. Though small and rather frail, she was a very brave woman and knew the hard side of life.

A strange thing happened the night he died. His corpse was still in the flap tent where they used to sleep, but she had moved her stretcher into the frame house. During the night I woke up to find her sitting on her stretcher talking, a lighted candle on a box next to her. She seemed to be talking to the Boss. She was asking questions and answering them; I could only hear her voice. After a time she stopped, turned to me and asked: "Did you see him?" I hadn't and said so. She then asked if I had heard him talking. Again I said No. I never found the answer to this strange happening.

There were other strange things about this very good woman – for she was good, she never said nasty things about other people and never did nasty things. She may have been weak in some things and one could not blame her for not knowing anything about bringing up children. She did all she knew how for me even if she showed me no affection.

She once spoke of a dream she used to have. It was always of having lice in her hair. She dreaded lice and considered it dirty to have them. She often washed my head for fear that, when she had the dream, someone related to her would die. When her Mother had died, she had two large lice. And strange as it may seem, at breakfast the very morning her husband died, she had told both of us that she had dreamed she had a large louse in her hair – and her husband died within the hour. Later on another occasion, she told me that she had the dream again, but this time there were a few quite large lice. A cable came a few days later to say her brother Ethelbert had died of cholera in India on the very night of her dream. I have never found a satisfactory explanation for this. Indeed I have carried the memory of it throughout my life without ever finding an answer.

### **I take over, young as I was**

After the Boss's death, I took over. Although I was very young, I went on working the claim as usual, always hoping to find a diamond and supplement the larder for we were now almost without enough to

eat.<sup>19</sup> The Missus sold the Boss's clothes and effects for a few pounds. The Irishman had further bouts of asthma and I helped him as usual. One day the Irishman told me that he had had some luck, he had found a small diamond. He went to Christiana and sold it to a diamond buyer. He returned a few days later with a load of planks and wood. I thought he was preparing to build himself a wooden shack perhaps for his asthma. A lot of sawing and nailing went on for some time. One day I called on him to see how far his shack had come on, but instead I found, screened by a bush, a lovely large boat. To my astonishment, the Irishman promptly gave it to me. The thrill of launching the boat with the aid of several other diggers was beyond belief. It turned out that the Irishman was a professional boat builder and had gone to the diamond fields to make, he hoped, a quick fortune. Now he had decided to leave the fields before his small savings were used up. He was wise to leave. I missed him but I had learned a great deal from him. I learnt how to control my temper, for I had quite a temper. Nancy was the only person who could instantly stop my temper but this man taught me how to control it completely, as well as many other things of great importance to my life.

The boat was a blessing as the river had risen higher and stopped all work. The last remaining funds had run out, so the Missus and I were reduced to a little bread and water, the bread being got by giving an IOU note to the Jew who had a shop on the hillside. It was almost always the way on the diamond fields: wherever there were camps of diggers, you would find a Jew shop. He would keep everything that the average digger needed. This particular shop was a wood and iron structure painted a dull red. The Jew lived in a lean-to that opened into the shop. He was a fat round-faced man, tough but obliging and quite popular. The note we gave him pledged a tent as security up to £5 credit. We only bought bread. There was not enough money to buy cartridges to shoot for meat; instead, I fished and sometimes bartered a fish for a little fat for frying in. Setting traps for small game sometimes helped a lot. I wonder how many people know what it is like to be hungry and to really tighten your belt. We were lucky, however, because some of the diggers sometimes gave us a little meal which they really needed for themselves. One has, however, a certain pride and one keeps one's hardships to oneself.

### **Life as a ferryman**

At about this point the river rose much higher and it was not possible to cross at the Christiana drift or anywhere further along. This is when the boat came as a blessing. I used it to carry passengers across the river. I charged 6 pence a head one way. I also carried all the goods for the old Jew across at 10/- a load. Since this was a sort of contract to do it once a week, the debt to the Jew was soon paid off and food became plentiful for us again, even if sparing. I could also buy cartridges again, so we also now had more than enough meat. The islands were teeming with game and I could reach them with the boat. I only shot for the pot and sometimes there was a little over which I gave away.

I now had two dogs, one a half-breed fox terrier called Spottie, the other a wire-haired terrier, Chum. They were always with me and came to heel on command and fetched when told to. When in the boat Spottie would sit on the foreward deck and Chum aft. If I brought down a wild duck over water, I would tell them to fetch it. Both would leap in and race to the duck. Chum was the faster swimmer and nearly always did the fetching. But Spottie was the better runner on land and did most of the fetching there. He was sleek too and could get through brambles quicker. I loved my dogs, and I think they loved me. Nancy often came hunting too, but she did not like seeing animals being shot. So she rarely watched. I wasn't keen either, but the pot had to be filled. I was taught, however, not ever to shoot a sitting bird or animal; you had to give it a sporting chance.

The boat was a great asset and its earnings carefully saved up for a rainy day or when the dry season came and the earnings would fall or come to be nil. It was lovely to go out on adventures with Nancy and the two dogs. We would go to the upper reaches of the pool. There it was necessary to row like mad to reach the next pool and quiet water. On one occasion, we had reached about half way when Nancy yelled that there was a snake ahead. The unbelievable scene would be difficult to beat – the rushing brown water, the sides lined with shimmering reeds, and the large brilliant green snake swimming across into the reeds.

It was dangerous traversing these torrents, but I learned to know by the surface of the water where submerged rocks were and would carefully avoid them. Rowing across the river when it was coming down in flood was also risky as half-submerged trees and stumps were dangerous to collide with. At night, particularly in bad weather, it was of course much worse. It often happened that a digger, who may have made a find, had had a few drinks and left town late, would reach the bank and fire revolver shots as a signal. Someone would hear them even if I did not. Another way of signaling was to swing a lantern. Usually, however, I would be told if the passenger was returning the same day or later.

One day a man with 4 dogs hired me to take him to an island at the lower end of the big pool. He was after some otters living in the reeds near a little sand spit. I always kept my dogs off the otters as I had been told that they were dangerous to dogs. However this man set his dogs into the reeds and after a little time a terrible racket started – barking, screaming, crashing about and then silence. We went into the reeds to investigate and found the dogs with all their throats torn. As for the otters, they had slipped away into the water. They were of a large sort and had ample food as the river was full of fish.

The diamond diggings were a good place for hard work. But you had to be young, fairly strong and ready to rough it. Also you should have some kind of job and never depend on finding diamonds. With any luck at all, however, you can depend on finding health and strength. And as for luck, it does play a part sometimes. Here's an example. About five minutes walk from our camp there lived an Englishman, Fred Still, and his old father. Fred was about 30. He had lost his mother years before. The doctors had advised his father to come out to Africa and be in the open air for his health. Fred, who thought the world of his father, brought him out to the fields. They would hopefully provide Fred with the chance of making a fortune and at the same time do for his father. For about a year, the old man improved steadily and Fred was on top of the world.

Both Fred and his father were cultured people with charming manners and quite unassuming. But as time went on, Fred's money began to run out. One can always tell when a digger starts selling things he least needs. One morning Fred came and told us that his father had died suddenly in the night. After he was buried, Fred sold off the old man's things and carried on work as usual. He had a claim on the bank where the river had taken a slight bend. At this point the river had deposited soil to a depth of 8 or 10 feet. You had to dig away this overburden before the gravel<sup>20</sup> could be reached.

### **Digging for diamonds – an ABC**

The procedure was to dig a large square hole about 12 or 14 feet across. Steps would be cut along one side to be able to walk up and down. When you got down to a depth where you could no longer just throw the soil out of the hole, you would then dig down deeper in only half the square. You could then shovel the soil on to the other half and throw it out from there. Having reached the gravel, you would have to get that out too. It was a terrible job carrying it up bucket by bucket. So you would make a

device we called a whip. This was a long pole with a notch cut near the thicker end. This fitted into a prong cut from a bit of a tree shaped like a V. The bottom of the V was firmly set in the ground. Once the long pole was fitted to the V, a heavy stone was fixed to its thicker end and a rope fixed to the other end. The rope would have an iron hook. The thin end of the pole was now able to pivot down into the hole and up again into the air. When operating it, you pulled the long thin end down, walked down into the hole, filled the bucket with gravel, hooked it to the rope, walked up again, pushed the weighted end down, and up came the bucket. Unhook it, dump the contents in a heap, and you are ready to start the washing and sorting. This slow process would continue all day.

This is what Fred was doing. He had become thin and much quieter since his father died. His clothes were rags and he wore pieces of sacking around his feet for shoes. He was very friendly with me and the Missus often asked him to a good hearty meal in the evenings. But he never ate more than the others, although he could have eaten the lot. Poor Fred, he was in a bad way.

One evening he came uninvited. After eating with us, he quietly told the Missus and me that he had had some luck. He had found a diamond and would show it to us if we would not say a word about it. It could be dangerous to show a diamond except a very small one around the camp. Fred calmly took a large old fashioned shaving brush out of his pocket. The back end contained the soap. He removed the soap, turned the brush over above his palm, and out rolled the most beautiful diamond. It was about the size of a walnut, and with a most beautiful shape, quality and colour. We could not take our eyes off it. Fred calmly put it back, his only regret apparently being that his father was not alive.

The next morning Fred borrowed an old bicycle. It had no handle grips, mudguards or brakes and was a fixed wheel. Fred rode this thing all the way to Kimberley. He afterwards related how he had gone to a bank and asked to see the manager. They almost threw him out on account of his clothes and being unshaven; he looked the worst kind of tramp. But he eventually managed to get to see the manager. Fred explained that he had found a diamond and wished it to be kept in safe custody until it could be valued by experts and sold. The manager softened a bit. Fred pulled out his soap brush and produced the magnificent diamond. Suddenly, the manager became a different man. He at once got in touch with a government valuator and arranged everything for Fred, as well as advancing him as much money as he wanted. The diamond was sold for some £80,000.<sup>21</sup> Fred rode the bicycle back to the camp, gave his claim and effects away, and left the country. When it became known that Fred had made such a wonderful find, the whole area became a turbulent place and a hive of work. But I never heard of any further stones being found there.

About this time my earning our living from the ferry suddenly got competition. Another boat began to operate from the Transvaal side. It was owned by a nearby farmer who thought to make some money out of it. The first thing he did was to cut prices. He charged the goods for the Jew shop at about half my price and passenger fares were lower too. However the boat worked only for a short time. It then disappeared, and was never seen again. It was said the diggers had loaded it with stones one night and sunk it in the pool. And I had no further competition!

Soon the river started to subside and the diggers began getting ready for working in the river bed again. There was also less work for my boat as the drift became fordable. The stream on the Free State side at the lower end of the pool stopped running over the rise. Diggers who had worked on this rise had finds, and their claims were pegged all along, even though this part was under water. You paid £1 a year for a submerged claim. The Missus and I had one of these claims, but it was the last one, being opposite the point of the island. You could not, of course, build a little breakwater across if there was no island. The

water here was about 6 feet deep. All the diggers who had claims here got together and worked out the cost of each of them contributing to the building of a breakwater from the bank to the island. We were approached, but we did not have enough money. So we had to be left out.

All these arrangements were made before the river was low enough to commence operations. Equipment was got, including a strong steel cable, trolley wheels, an engine and large centrifugal pump. Work was begun by fixing the cable from the bank to the island forming an aerial cableway. It had a large platform attached to it, and ran on grooved wheels, with ropes for pulling it from bank to bank. I had the job of helping with my boat and so was able to earn a little.

About this time the Missus told me at breakfast that she had had another dream of lice in her hair. A few days later she got a cable from India to say that her brother Ethelbert had died of cholera. Sometime later she got his effects including £80 which he had left her in his will. It was too late now to join the other diggers; the breakwater had already been built and the water pumped out. The pumping alone had taken about a month, working day and night to empty the water out. The breakwater was made of sandbags and loose soil. It was perhaps 15 feet wide at the base and about 3 feet on top; the height was about 6 or 8 feet. I used to sit in the engine shed often, sometimes till late at night, and got to know all about it. It was a hot bulb type of engine, ran on paraffin, and had two little red hot tubes inside a casing which were heated by a blow lamp to start it.

Work proceeded with all the diggers on their claims. They stuck to the usual procedure of shielding the sorting tables when other diggers were working close by. The idea was that no one could see anyone else's findings. The screens are mostly just sacking about 4 ft. high mounted on sticks surrounding three sides. The digger's body hid the 4<sup>th</sup> side, and he could see over the top if anyone came along while he was sorting.

The Missus and I were anxious to work our claim. But the problem was that if no one found any diamonds in your particular area, it would have been useless spending money on your claim; on the other hand, if it was a rich area, one would never know until it was too late and the river might be down again in flood. There seemed to be no way to find out. But I thought out a plan. I climbed high into the big willow trees growing on the island and hanging out over the stream. In this way I was able to get a good view of all the sorting tables, looking down from above. No digger ever thought to look up into the trees as he was far too busy at his work, the more so if he was finding any diamonds. What is more, by this time, I knew all diggers' tricks and habits. I would watch and then suddenly see a digger pop something into his mouth, then straighten up, and have a casual look around to see if anyone was around. I might not be able to see the actual diamond from this distance, it was clear which area had a good potential. From where I was, I was able to draw a line which, if continued, would pass through their claim at an angle. It was soon clear that it would be useless to work the island side as no one seemed to find anything there.

The Missus and I got busy. First, we bought, for a few pounds, a cableway, pump and engine. The latter was given us by a digger who had a breakwater on part of his claim. (If another breakwater was built above his, then he could work the full area of his claim by removing a part of the old breakwater; but he was not allowed to do so until all the diggers lower down had finished, in case the upper breakwater broke.) We employed a German, Carl Sammelhok, who had helped erect the cable in the first place, together with a small gang of natives. The cable was moved. Some of the diggers recommended that, to save time as it was getting late in the season, galvanized iron frames should be made and placed in a line across and filled with soil. We did this and it worked quite well. But, after pumping it out and with



only a foot of water remaining, the thing broke. In a couple of minutes, four whole days and nights of pumping were completely wasted. Repairs had to be done and further soil put in the frames which were then reinforced by throwing tons and tons of soil on the outside, together with heavy poles shoring up the iron wall on the inside. This time the wall held.

Digging began inside the without delay. I worked frantically and Carl drove the natives all he could. He was a square-headed man with short, wire-like ginger hair. He was the most cruel man I had ever encountered. He knocked the natives about and made them so scared that they were even afraid to run away. I did all the sorting and supervised every move, in accordance with plan I had made based on what I had observed from the willow trees.

### **The Vaal comes down in spuit again**

But before the work was complete, the mounted police arrived to warn all the diggers to get out of the river bed, as the river was coming down in heavy flood. The digger who had been working under the old breakwater had only got about half way when he had to abandon his site. As for our tools and equipment, including my boat, they were hauled up to high ground. I then cut up the hauling ropes of the overhead trolley into short lengths, and tied one end to the steel wire cable and the other to the box frames all along the length of our breakwater.

The news came that the flood could be expected to reach this part in the early hours. Next morning I, with Nancy beside me, sat opposite the breakwater. Other diggers were around also. It was about 6 a.m. Suddenly we heard a distant roar. The river was racing down the dry, rock-strewn channels above the big pool. Just as suddenly the roar stopped. The water had now evidently reached the big pool. Suddenly it seemed to leap up the banks something like 25 or 30 feet. It formed a huge wave that thundered over our poor little breakwater and went crashing and roaring on. The overhead cable was tight as a string. Then the galvanized iron frames started to pop up, half floating in the wash of the current. Then came the usual trees, branches, dead animals and the rest floating in the muddy water. When the river settled to a fairly steady level, I with the aid of several diggers got the boat back in the water and rescued the iron frames along with the other iron. They were only a little damaged where the wooden poles had held. I managed to sell what we salvaged quite quickly.

The result of all my work in our now submerged claim was at least that I had found 9 diamonds. These were sold for £2,100.

Soon after, a warning was given that a further, even higher, flood was on its way. There was no time to move our frame house, but we did take our flap tent and pitched it on high ground. We only had time to take our clothing, a trunk or two, and some small things. Everything else was parked on top of the tables in the hope that the water would not wash them away. The next day the river was 8 to 10 inches over the floor, but after a day or two it went down, leaving a carpet of mud over the floor. At this point, we sold the frame house and all our equipment. The boat was bought by the old Jew. He was not a bad old man and was in fact very good to many of the diggers.

I remember only one fright he had at their hands. It happened when I was out one night shooting spring hares. The method was to choose a dark night, strap a bicycle gas lamp on top of one's head, and then walk over the veld. The light gave you a little help in avoiding bushes, rocks, holes etc. And if a spring hare is about, he will watch you, and you will see his eye reflected back at you. You have to be

careful not to go into areas where sheep are because they also show only one eye. You shoot at the eye and mark the direction. If you make a hit, you will find the spring hare there.

One night I went out and walked some miles when suddenly I saw an eye. I upped my gun and fired. The sound was like hitting a rock. But the eye appeared again, so I fired the other barrel. This time there was a yell. On looking more carefully, I saw the faint outline of the Jew's shop. He put his light out and ran home like the wind. The next morning word went round that someone had tried to murder him for his money. All the diggers went to the shop to find out what happened, including me. I walked round the side and found pellet marks on the paint there and in the middle was a small hole in the iron. I said nothing about it. It seems the Jew was busy counting his takings. He had a light inside, and his leg must have been in line with the hole, making it appear to blink. No one ever discovered the truth.

## 4. How machinery became my life

### **Farewell to diamonds; a new life in Durban**

The last day had now come for me on the diamond fields. I rowed my boat over with the Missus, Nancy and our effects for the last time. Nancy was to take the boat back and hand it over to the Jew. A wagon was waiting to take the Missus and me to Christiana railway station. There were goodbyes to Nancy, a few hugs, and my request for her to get her parents to bring her to Durban when they left the fields. Nancy stood there on the river bank and waved, wiping her eyes with her hankie. I had a very big lump in my throat. This was the last time I ever saw her for she died not long after. Her parents went to Rhodesia and we never heard of them again. But Nancy remained in my mind all my life, as will be seen later.

We broke our journey at Johannesburg, where we stayed with Mr and Mrs Reed and their two boys who lived at Jeppe, one station beyond Park Station. Mr Reed was a very strict man. He thrashed his boys for the least thing; he was a really cruel father. The eldest boy Dick was much the same age as me. He was at school, so I had time on my hands. I did a lot of walking about and going to Park Station and back. It was here that I saw a real, horse-drawn fire engine pass for the first and last time. I was looking at shop windows when there came a clanging of bells. All the traffic pulled to the sides of the street and stopped. Louder and louder came the bells and the galloping horses. It was wonderful to see a long train of beautiful horses with shining harness, and two men with shining brass helmets on the box, one with the reins. It has always been a wonder to me to see the magnificent control the driver had over the horses. The fire engine itself was lined with more brass helmeted men. It had a bright shining copper and brass boiler with a chimney and black smoke pouring from it. And there were two firemen on a small platform at the back, hanging on and stoking the fire. Then the whole thing disappeared racing down the street.

After a short stay in Jeppe, the Missus and I continued our journey to Durban. There we lived at the Brokenshaws. Frank and his wife had 13 children and a large double-storied house called Pendennis. It was a beautifully run home with culture and good taste. The eldest boy was Carne, then Lilian the eldest girl. Ivy and Morris were the youngest. We stayed there a considerable time. Carne used to take me out fishing and hunting during holidays and weekends. The family went down the South Coast for shooting and fishing as well. As a result, I got to know the whole area from Umgeni to Umzababa [Umzimvubu?], including the Bluff, Tsapingo (?), Jacobs, Wentworth and other places.<sup>22</sup> Wentworth and thereabout was good shooting for bush buck.

### **I get a job at the Iron, Concrete and Asbestos Company**

Then came the day when what to do with me was discussed. I could not run wild anymore. Plans were made for me to work at Harvey Greenacers as an errand boy. Since Mr Brokenshaw was a partner, there seemed no difficulty. Here, however, Carne stepped in and said I showed very strong mechanical tendencies and that he would get me into an engineering firm. This is how I became indentured with the Iron, Concrete and Asbestos Company at Wentworth. There were no trains reaching Wentworth by 7.20 in the morning, so I had to walk. It took about 3 hours. Heavy going, but at least there was a train at the end of the day which left about 5.15 for the return journey. Luckily, also, it was not long before a

goods train was put on, and I then travelled in the guards van. And later on, a passenger coach was put on. Also the time was changed so that the train arrived at Wentworth just before 7.20 a.m. All this was about the time when horse trams were replaced by electric trams. Horse trams used to run from the town hall to the top of Berea Road. How alarming it is to compare them with today. You could jump on or off them anywhere.

I enjoyed the work and worked hard. But about this time I began to think myself of my future and make a plan. I decided I would earn enough money at engineering and then become a doctor. But I was only getting 2/6 a month which I could spend, besides any money I could earn in other ways or was given, which mostly went on cigarettes or tobacco. I was now about 14, or perhaps a bit younger. Mr Geldard, who was a clever machinist, was the foreman and Mr Skimmer the manager. A joke was that they were skimmer by name and skimmer by nature. After a time in the works I was sent to a place near South Coast Junction to a site where Huletts sugar refinery was to be built. Here I had charge of a gang of Natives and Indians (Coolies) operating the hollow block-making machines. These machines had been made in the Wentworth works. One day I got instructions to make slightly curved concrete blocks for a huge chimney stack. The stack was duly built but, not long after, a series of cracks appeared. It was said that the Skimmers had ordered the cement content to be reduced. But fortunately those responsible, bearing in mind the manager's 'skimmer by nature' reputation, did not reduce the proportion and save tons of cement all that much. It was never known what really happened.

While I was at these works, I had only one accident which was no doubt my own fault. I had been using a machine to bore holes in metal parts. I had been told to bolt them down first. But as this would be slower than not bolting them down, one of the parts jammed, flew out of the machine and cut a V-shaped hole in my upper lip! I was back at work after a couple days. But I would never be able to grow a mustache as it would have shown up a distinct V in the middle. This is how I learnt the hard way to treat machines with respect.

After about two years of hard work there, I had the feeling that I could not learn much more and I was in a hurry to earn with a view to wanting my medical training. (I should mention that I did have hobbies, too, in particular I was interested in building a boat which I did at night, weekends and public holidays.) I heard of the African Marine and General Engineering Co. at the Point (in Durban). I applied and got a position. There was a snag, however, because I dared not let anyone know that I had worked at engineering before as I would not have been taken on. So I had to start at the beginning and not let on what I already knew how to do. This was not easy. The foreman soon found me – mistakenly – to be unusual. I seemed to learn almost without being taught! Anyway, he became interested in me and pushed me to a higher grade of work time after time. In the meantime I felt that my education was very lacking.<sup>23</sup> So I joined a night school which I attended three nights a week and worked at every spare hour I could find. Then I joined the Tech.

The Missus and I had moved from the Brokenshaws' home by now and were living in a terrible place in Gravel. It was a small house in Durwent Lane to save expense – almost a slum. It was here that the Missus got to know Bob Hamilton. I never knew how she found him. He was about 10 years younger than she. A sort of love affair started, and it was not long before she married him. The three of us moved to Lennox Road which was a much better locality. I was very lean, but fit and strong, by now. One night Bob turned up drunk. I got hold of him and threw him through a French window into the garden. Here was a spot of trouble! You could hardly throw a man who could be said to be your stepfather through a window! So I left the house and got a room with one of my friends.

### **Earning my living**

I was now earning reasonably well. Besides I had the money the Missus had given me out of what was left of the £2,100 we had made on the diamond fields. This was £500. She gave me this when she married Bob. By this time, I had already saved another £500 which I had earned from various side lines. I worked a lot of overtime and got well paid. I also took advantage of human laziness. For instance, if one of the highly skilled machinists had an important job on and had to work overtime all night, I would offer my services as his assistant. He would accept and often open up a bit and tell me all sorts of tricks of the trade which I would otherwise never have known. He only told me them on the understanding that the information was a complete secret. After the foreman had gone home in the early evening, this man would also go home as usual, having given me careful instructions about the work. I was most careful and never took chances with this work – one slip up and you would never again get another chance. The man would reappear about 5 a.m., check my work, grumble a bit, and tell me to doss down for a couple of hours sleep. I would have a quick wash, take my boots off, use them as a pillow, lie on a bench and sleep. He would then wake me at 7. I would go to a shop nearby to get a bun or two and be ready for the usual day's work at 7.20. On Friday (pay day) he would give me a good share of his night's overtime. And if it was a public holiday and double time, I would get quite a bit more. Of course, it was kept a complete secret and no one knows that the man was not there all night. These men were highly skilled and real artists at their work. I sometimes could double my earnings in this way, apart from my own overtime.

I had an advantage over the other boys as a result of my unintentional deception when I had got this job originally. And when I reached the limit of my previous knowledge, I just had to carry on at this seemingly extraordinary rate of progress. I was in a stream and carried along by it, and other people had confidence in me and thought I knew all about it. But I was no brighter than most other boys; it was just that I was forced to be.

### **Making friends, and losing them**

I was fairly popular with everybody at the works. I was quiet and rather reserved and kept my knowledge to myself. I had some special friends. One was Cecil Wickes. Cecil was a brilliant boy of much the same age. He excelled in very fine accurate work. He had wonderful eyesight and could split a one thousandth of an inch with the naked eye. He, too, was quiet and reserved. Cecil became one of the leading men at the works. Later Cecil and I worked as a team. We exchanged information and always helped the younger boys. So we were much sought after by the young ones to work in their gangs.

There were two other friends I had at the works. They were rather weaker minded than me and only average or below average in their work. But they were nice clean-minded, good boys. One, Arthur Merridew, was a kind and serious boy with refined manners and gentlemanly ways, while Garson was rather rough but had a good nature. The three of us became friends. We always went about together, to theatres, out shooting, fishing, boating etc. We also made a pact: if anyone of the three got a better job, he would try to get the others to join him. We also opened a bank account so that if one of us needed money for their advancement, they could draw on it. This involved each of us paying into the account an amount each month. We also agreed that the rules of the leader would be obeyed; if a dispute should occur, then a vote would settle it; and there were to be no girls or women.

This latter rule was caused by an experience I had whilst down the South Coast one weekend. I was staying with some distant relations of the Missus at Warner Beach. They had a girl who was most unpopular with other children. She was spoiled and pampered a great deal. She had large dark eyes, thin face, a jutting out chin, and very protruding teeth. In fact, she was unpleasant and very ugly. In the morning I was about to go up the river for a row before lunch. I saw the girl sitting nearby all alone, so invited her to go too. She got up and ran home like the devil. When I got back for lunch, the Missus asked me if I had asked the girl to go up the river for immoral purposes. When the girl was confronted by her parents, the Missus and I, she broke down and said she had not meant to convey that impression. As for me, I did not like girls in any case, but now I hated them. As for the three pals, we stuck together and work went on steadily.

One day Bob Hamilton came to the room we shared and brought a message from the Missus. She wanted me to come back. Bob had not touched a drop of drink since I had been thrown him through the window. And he promised he would never need another lesson! What was more, he was building a new house at Umbilo and would add another room for me if I came back. In the circumstances I accepted. Bob was as good as his word. He even went further. He built a wood and iron room in the yard as a workshop for me. I used this for all my engineering experiments.

Around this time, Arthur left for Johannesburg with the idea of finding a better job and perhaps getting Garson and me up there. However his letters were not too cheerful. Then a letter came asking me to lend him my revolver. I wrote back and refused unless he would tell me what he wanted it for. No more was heard for some time. Then Arthur was seen back in Durban. I met him at the old Durban Post Office and we arranged to have a talk in the workshop at home where the three of us had always met and talked. I gave him the key as he would be there first. After work I went straight home. There I found the key in the workshop lock, Arthur not there, but a bottle of cyanide left open on the bench. I tumbled to what might have happened. I ran for my motorcycle which I had bought secondhand from Carne. It was a very good machine. I raced like a bat out of hell for Arthur's home, which was on Ridge Road on the Berea. Having reached there I ran straight through the house and into Arthur's room. Too late, Arthur was dying; he had taken cyanide and strong coffee. I had never seen or dreamed of such a terrible death. I went back to tell Garson what had happened. Both of us were shocked and could not understand the reason. Later it turned out that he had been in love with a girl next door. He had kept it a secret because of our pact – no women. It seems the girl accepted his presents and attention while being in love with someone else. When Arthur went to Johannesburg, she finally wrote to tell him she was marrying someone else. He walked out of his job, returned to Durban, went to see her and told her that, if she married this other man after all she had promised him, his funeral would pass her door. And it did.

Turning to what was happening in my life, I was working hard at the Tech three nights a week. I rarely went to bed before midnight or one in the morning. I took on helping the younger pupils at the Tech. Later on I met a Mr Widderson and his wife. He was English with pleasing manners. He had a full knowledge of book-keeping and business. He also knew numerous business people in town. He asked me to join him in a half share partnership in an engineering venture. He explained the whole scheme. It seemed most attractive and a speedy way of making money for the medical training I was still set on doing.<sup>24</sup>

I discussed it with my friend, Garson, who was quite keen. But he seemed to be a bit off his happy spirit of late. He had hinted, when I asked him, that things were troubling him at home a bit, but he would not

say more. One afternoon he had a job which had to be finished. There was about an hour's work still to be done. He asked me if I would finish it for him as he was not feeling too good. After he had gone home, some of the other boys told me that Garson had given away all his own tools to various others. They came to enquire what it was all about, expecting that since I was his pal, I should know. But I didn't.

I passed the work on to someone else and rushed to his home. He was not there. His body was found the next day with his head nearly blown off. What happened was that this sweet-natured, rather rough happy boy, whose parents lived far away on the Bluff where it was too far for him to get to and from work, lived with an uncle and very young aunt who was most attractive. He had fallen violently in love with her. He had to suppress his feelings but they got worse. He wanted no other woman. But she was married and his uncle was always nice and helpful to him which only made things worse. He could not even leave as there was no reason he could give without disclosing his feelings. There was only one thing left. Arthur had done it, and he would too. I took all this very badly. I firmly decided that girls and women were definitely dangerous and that I would not even make close friends with any of them.

### **Another go at diamond digging – Eastley Junction**

A letter arrived from Stanley Brokenshaw, a younger brother of Carne. He asked me if I would join him for a four months diamond digging venture and holiday on the diggings at Eastley Junction in the Transvaal. As I was feeling bad over the tragedy of both my pals, I accepted and left almost at once. But before leaving I arranged with Mr Widderson to get the new works ready to start on my return. I met Stanley at Estcourt and was shown his outfitters shop. The next day we left for the fields. At Eastley we bought equipment and a square tent. When the camp was pitched, work started at once. Two Natives were employed to help as our time was rather short and our funds would run to it.



**John at the Eastley Junction diamond  
rush, 1913 – aged c. 20 years old**

The diggings here were on dry land and so the procedure a little different. No water was used in the rocking baby sieves. Instead the gravel and sand were collected in a big heap. When it was large enough a rotary washing machine was hired for a day or two, the usual cost being about 4/- per day. The principle employed depended on the difference between heavy and light material. The machine<sup>25</sup> had a very large round tin pan about 5 ft. in diameter and 15 inches deep. It had a hole in the middle and another pan 10 or 12 inches deep fitted with a bottom below it. This one was less high than the outside tin so that if water was to be put in, it would overflow the tin tube in the middle. A bearing was mounted under the tube tin and a vertical rotatable shaft was held by an upper frame where there was a bevel gear and a horizontal shaft with a crank handle at each end. Fitted to the vertical shaft were a number of spoke-like arms at a height just about the rim of the large tin. Blades like heavy knives were fitted at a slight angle to the arms, spaced along them and reaching just clear of the bottom of the tin. When the handles were turned, the arms with the knives rotated between the two tins. Gravel was fed into the tin, mixed with water and sand. The blades further mixed it until it became a muddy mass with the gravel suspended in it.

What happened then was that the heavier gravel slowly sank to the bottom while the angled blades slowly pushed it towards the outer edge on the bottom. The lighter gravel in suspension above this would float slowly to the middle. As more gravel and water were fed into the machine, the lighter gravel and water would run over and be carried away. There was a hole with a shutter on the outside edge which could be opened from time to time and from where a bucket full of mud and gravel would be tapped out from time to time. This material was then put into a sieve and gravitated and sorted in the usual way.

As a result of this method, only a very small amount of material had to be sorted as the machine threw away all the lighter material and retained only the heavy stuff in which diamonds might be found. The water needed often had to be carried a long distance and so cost up to 1/6 for 40 gallons. The distance from water was therefore an important consideration. One had also to be careful when hiring these washing machines as some people were not strictly honest. I discovered they sometimes had specially made defects. These took the form of little undercut pockets in the outer rim of the pan where any diamonds would pan over. They were blocked with a material which melted when the machine was in use. The digger would not notice that they were clogged with heavy gravel and mud – or any diamonds that might have been in the material! When the machines were returned to their owner, he would remove the mixture, including the diamonds. As a result, I always checked on this before returning the machine.

This trip of ours was in the winter. It was very cold at night. And Stanley and I had to break the ice in the little river nearby to bathe. This consisted mostly of jumping in – and jumping out even faster. The days however were mostly hot. We did not have much luck finding diamonds, but it was a wonderful working holiday involving hard manual labour.

### **My own business**

While we were on the fields, I kept in touch with Cecil at the works. When I got back, Mr Widderson had things ready and we got started at once. Soon the little works was a hive of activity. I worked til 12 most nights. Money started to come in at a good rate. I took on a few extra hands. Widderson was



wonderful getting jobs. He also got good prices. But the work had to be of a high grade. At some point, the two of us became careless about delivery times and quality, and we lost a great deal of work to competitors nearby. Even so, I was up to my ears in work. I hardly ever saw my friends. Money came in fast and we bought more and more new machines.

## 5. In pursuit of my mother

### A shocking discovery

I had a 'cousin', Rosie. She was the daughter of one of the Boss's brothers. She, with her younger sister and brother and mother, lived nearby. The mother was a big fat woman with a large red face. Her father, too, was a corpulent man. If the Boss was my father, then Rosie's father would be my uncle. Rosie was a quiet, rather shy girl with pleasing manners, a year or two younger than me. She did most of the work at home. As for her mother, she was a lazy flabby person, always grumbling, but kind. Rosie used to ask me to tea whenever I had time. She also used to bring me a billycan of coffee to the works quite often which I appreciated a lot.

One day I went to have tea with her at her home. Everyone was sitting round the table, the mother at one end. Her husband was not there. During tea the mother began grumbling as usual, but with a difference. She started grumbling about intimate things between herself and her husband in front of the children. I was embarrassed and shocked. I turned to her and said that I could not understand how I could belong to a family like them. By her reaction, the extraordinary truth dawned on me. Now I could suddenly see that all the watching of me and other examples of strange behaviour had a foundation.

I left the house, leapt on my motor cycle, and went straight to the Missus. She was running Gordon Thomas's house at this time, and Bob was taking care of Gordon who was in very bad health. She and Bob had let their house at Umbilo. I had a room in Gordon's house – which was huge and had masses of servants. I found the Missus, put my arm round her and led her into the huge drawing room. I set her down on a sofa and told her that I had found out about myself. She, poor little woman, said she was glad because she had always thought I might find out some day. She asked how I had now done so. I told her that, as a result of my chance remark, Rosie's mother's face had given it away. All the strange things that had happened could only be explained by my not really belonging to this family. I said I wanted to hear the whole story from her and no one else.

So she told me how she and the Boss had written to Dr. Mackenzie all those years ago. She told me about the midwife, the financial arrangements that they had made with her, and finally how they had got me when I was still a little baby. They had also written to the whole family making them undertake never to disclose that I was not actually their child. It appears that they all agreed this in writing. And so this secret was closely kept for over 20 years.

### Determined to find my real mother

Then I asked her if she knew what my real name was and what had happened to my parents. She didn't know. And she urged me to leave well alone and not think about it further. This I was absolutely not prepared to do. I was determined to find my real mother. The Missus then told me there were some old letters in a trunk in the attic of the house in Umbilo. I went there and got permission from the tenants to look in the attic. I searched the trunk and found some letters. But they were only from the midwife relating to the dispatch of the baby and the financial arrangements. There was no mention of the baby's mother except that she was a woman of good birth.

I then went to Dr Mackenzie. He was the doctor to whom the Boss and the Missus had originally written. He knew very little except that he had brought me into the world and that my mother had been a beautiful and cultured young woman. But he did not remember her name or where she came from. He also advised me to leave well alone and get on with my work, continue my studies and eventually become a doctor. He, of course, knew of my intention in that regard. In fact, I had sometimes gone with him on his rounds and talked a lot about it. Dr Mac was a wonderful, kind man. He knew the family secret and no doubt had an interest in me. When he heard how I had now found out what had happened, he called the aunt a stupid old woman. The doctor's wife was also a charming person, most kind and gentle. She had been crippled as a result of a motor accident which occurred when her husband had turned his car over whilst driving far too fast. He was known as "Hellfire Mac." He would race through town to get to his patients, and all the police would know he was on a life or death case. It was believed that he always regretted the damage to his wife and never forgave himself for it.

Having got no information which would lead me to finding out my mother's name or her whereabouts, I then sought out the midwife. Dr. Mac had given me her name. I tried to track her down but she had died a number of years before. However she had two daughters, both of whom had married. I found the younger one. She was extremely nice. She well remembered the baby boy. She and her sister had been very fond of him. But she had no information of value to me. But she did say that it was usual in those times that all a deceased person's papers and effects would go to the eldest offspring, in this case her sister. The documents were kept in a tin box, and she gave the name and address of her sister. I then went there, but this woman was not in the least cooperative and would have nothing to do with helping me. She admitted having a box of her late mother's effects, but they were a secret which she would not disclose and she ended our discussion. I was now seemingly at a dead end and would have to think up a plan about what to do rather carefully. In the meantime activity at the works became heavy going. I could not do both investigating and working at the same time. The result was that I lost interest in my work. I talked it over with Widderson and suggested he should get another partner and buy me out. He wouldn't agree to this and said that if I was quitting, then he would too, and therefore we would have to sell the business.

Meanwhile I had made up my mind to get whatever documents or letters there might be in the midwife's trunk, come what may. I found out that the elder daughter's husband was an engine driver on the main line, as well as the shifts he was on. I chose a night when he was on duty. Having watched the house and looked in through the windows when his wife was out, I knew the layout. About midnight I opened the latch of a back window with a steel blade and climbed in. I already had a good idea of the box I was looking for from the younger sister's description. I made my way to the bedroom. I was just about to look about for it when the woman woke up. I swung round and pointed a revolver at her, saying I would shoot if she screamed. She already had her mouth open and was shaking like a jelly. Actually I doubted if she could scream even if she had wanted to, she was so terrified. Slowly she got calmer after recognizing me. I explained that all I wanted was any letters or papers which I considered belonged to me in any case. I undertook, of course, not to harm her and she need never see me again.

After a bit of persuasion, she pointed to a tin box. I put it on the bed. She opened it and took out several bundles of letters and papers, one of which she gave to me saying that I must promise not to do anything about it. I didn't know what she meant but it seemed clear she was trying to protect her mother in some way. In the end she let me out of the front door and told me never to come back again. Also, that she had such a fright, she would never be able to sleep alone again. I once again told her that all I wanted was information which would lead me to my mother. I then hurried home with the bundle of letters. Once in my room, I began to look at them. They were rather disappointing as they contained

little that I could understand. A couple of them referred to the baby and the financial arrangements with the Standard Bank manager where the midwife would be paid what was owing. They were signed by a J. Raubenheimer. One other letter referred to the Boss and the Missus coming to fetch the baby soon. Pinned to this was a sort of certificate or copy of one. It referred to the death of a girl baby but over the sex was written in pencil "boy". There was also a number and a date.

There were a few other letters too, including several from the Boss and the Missus with all sorts of arrangements about the baby boy being sent to Johannesburg and a number of financial arrangements and payments. There was nothing more except a few notes in pencil, and figures, which made no sense. All I now knew was that my mother had used the name J. Raubenheimer and that I had something to do with a baby girl who had died. But crucially there was no address. Having made some notes, I sent all the letters back to the woman with a note advising that they should be burnt.

I then decided to find the bank manager as he had dealt with the money arrangements. Perhaps he might know a bit more. I went to the bank in West Street, saw the manager, and asked for the name and address of the man who had been the manager back in 1893. He just rang a bell and told the attendant to see me out. But then I noticed another bank just opposite. I again asked to see the manager. This man was most charming and turned up some records and gave me the name. But he said the man had retired long ago and he did not know where he could be found now. (By the way, in gratitude, I have banked with the National Bank ever since.)<sup>26</sup> Naturally, I was disappointed. I went to see Dr Mac again and told him how far I had got. When I mentioned the bank manager's name and the name Raubenheimer, he at once remembered them. As luck would have it, this bank manager was a great friend of his and Dr Mac now remembered talking about the Raubenheimer affair with him. This friend of his had retired and was now living in Johannesburg. Dr Mac promised to write to him and get all the information he could.

I then went to the Births and Deaths office with the number and date I had got from the letters held by the midwife. After a great search, I learned that a baby girl had died. I then got from the younger daughter the grave number and after a lot of trouble found it. It was just a little heap of earth overgrown with grass. It explained nothing, let alone what it all had to do with me. Anyway, I got a graves contractor to build a little wall round it and clean it up. And I put a sort of grey broken stone inside so that grass and weeds would be discouraged. I felt that I must have been with the little girl at some time and wanted to do something for her.

In the meantime Mr Widderson had found a buyer for works. But there was a condition to the sale. All the plant had to be moved and set up at the buyer's premises and I had to sign a contract not to start a similar enterprise for 7 years within a radius of 10 miles. I got busy and shifted the plant and signed the documents. The buyers were our competitors. How Widderson did it, I did not know. But various commercial travelers kept coming to enquire when delivery of a whole heap of new machinery would be required and the order confirmed. I gathered that Widderson had spread this idea deliberately in order that our competitors would hear of it. They must have got scared and decided to buy us out. What's more, they paid about £4,000 more than the business was worth. The total was £16,000, including book debts and the bank account, but excluding amounts owing to a few creditors.

### **On the trail to Cape Town**

While all this winding up of the business was going on, Dr Mac got a reply from his bank manager friend in Johannesburg to say that the woman Raubenheimer had married a man whose name he could not

remember but who lived at some house in the Cape called *Palmyear*. This was all the information I could get. The only thing to do was to go and look for my mother, Mrs. Raubenheimer, who had married a man living in a house called Palmyear in the Cape. Right from the start, I felt certain that “in the Cape” meant Cape Town though of course it could have been anywhere in the Cape Province. Widderson still had a couple of months work to do, including handing customers over to the new owners, collecting outstanding accounts etc. But I was free to take a train to Cape Town at once. Bob tried hard to stop me going but the Missus did not. She knew that, if I once made up my mind, nothing would stop me.

I had a terrible train journey. My tummy packed up on me. However by the time I reached Cape Town, I had recovered a bit. I had never been there before and knew no one. But as soon as I reached Cape Town Station things began to happen which I could never later explain. I had virtually no information to go on and could not therefore reason out what my next move should be. It could be said I was quite lost. I didn’t know a single name of any suburb or how to get anywhere. But somehow I did not in any way feel lost. I simply went with the crowd out of the station. Outside I turned left instead of right for no apparent reason. On reaching a point where the railway turned a corner, I stopped to look around. I saw a signpost with a series of names on it and pointing in various directions. One of these was Claremont. For some reason, this name seemed to attract me more than the others. Perhaps it was because it was familiar as there was a Clairmont just out of Durban (it is now called Clairwood on the South Coast line). Somehow, this felt a bit like home to me.

I got into a tram marked Claremont and asked the conductor to put me off there. I rode on the top deck to get a better view of the surroundings. At Claremont the conductor put me off. This turned out to be at the Cape Town end of Claremont. I walked with my suitcase in the direction that the tram had taken. I passed various shops until I came to where they ended. Then I retraced my steps. When I had got about half way, I saw a policeman. He was a youngish Afrikaner. I asked him if he knew of some boarding house nearby where I could put up. He said there was a vacant room where he was living just a little lower down the road and that he would take me there. We walked together to a small house. He introduced me to the owner and I got the room.

### **Reconnoitering**

As it was still early afternoon, I left my suitcase there and went out to explore. I walked up the road until I came to another road leading off to the left (this turned out to be Stegman Road). I crossed the railway line and came to a crossroads with a Jew shop<sup>27</sup> on the lefthand corner. Here I turned right. As I went along, I read all the names on the gates as I passed. Further up I noticed a railway station on the right. On the left was a large bunch of pine trees. And opposite the station was an avenue of tall pine trees with the name “Palmyra” on the entrance gate.

I opened the gate and walked down the avenue. At the end were two old thatch-roofed houses. On reaching the stoep I could hear voices and the noise of tea cups. There was evidently a small tea party going on. On the front door was a well-polished brass bell press. I knew that if I pressed it, a maid would answer, but if I knocked lightly, most likely the hostess herself would answer it. So I knocked. After a little delay a beautiful lady opened the door. I hadn’t thought of what to say. So I said the first thing that came into my head. Raising my hat, I asked if Mrs Johnstone lived here. The lady answered in a charming voice which had a strange indescribable effect on me. She said Mrs Johnstone lived three houses down on the right. I thanked her, raised my hat and left. I simply *knew* that I had seen my

mother. Once out of the gate, I found myself trembling all over. I made my way back to the boarding house.

That night I was sleepless and my tummy packed up again. This condition lasted a day or two. I now made friends with the policeman. He being an Afrikaner and I able to speak his language, we got on well. He had recently bought an autoharp but it was badly out of tune. I was fond of music and could play a number of instruments, including the harp. So I tuned it and played it to him, and followed up by showing him how to do it himself. By this time we were friends enough for me to ask him if he knew who lived at this house opposite the railway station called Palmyra. He said it was Mr Syme, a retired magistrate, with his wife and two children – a girl and her younger brother. In fact, one of his beats involved walking through the property on certain nights. I arranged to go with him and did so a couple of times. But he got a bit scared that the officer in charge would see the two of us and want to know what was going on. So we discontinued our night prowls together.

The First World War had already started by this time.<sup>28</sup> This made things more difficult for me because a person who was seen hanging about too much and without employment would be looked upon with suspicion. I told the policeman that I had not been able to get into the army and was looking for a job. I was thin and although 6 ft. tall and strong, somehow it didn't show. So I was able to bluff the policeman who in turn passed my explanation for being jobless on to the landlady. She didn't create any trouble; after all, she only had the two boarders, and I ate very little and had paid my rent in advance.

The next thing I did was take up a position on the railway station overlooking Palmyra's long avenue. It was a nice secluded spot, being in a railway shelter on the Palmyra Road side of the station. This side was seldom used in any case as it was the side away from the railway line itself. With a newspaper in front of me, I could sit all day without being noticed. And I could look over the top of the paper and watch every move in and out of the avenue.

I saw a young boy in school uniform riding a bicycle to and from school. I also saw a girl come and go. There was a man, too, who was finely built and about 6 ft. tall. He would come out of the property and a little later return. I decided to follow him. I waited until he (who was without doubt Mr Syme) was about to cross the bridge over the railway lines. I followed just behind him. He walked up to the village, round a block or two, and then came back while I peeled off to my hideout in the platform shelter.

Sometimes I got a better look at the people coming and going from Palmyra by actually standing opposite the gate leaning on the fence with my newspaper and pretending to be reading intently. Sometimes the lady, Mrs Syme, would go to Cape Town by train and take the two children with her. On one occasion, I stood close behind them at the ticket office and heard what their destination was. I then asked for the same ticket (a First Class Return to town please). I got into the same carriage and sat opposite or next to them still with my newspaper. I listened to all their conversation and it was clear that Mrs Syme was the mother of the two children. I wondered what relationship they were therefore to me. They could be my half brother and sister, or they might just be nothing. After all, I had no proof that Mrs Syme was my mother. I just had this strange feeling that no one else could be – her presence, her voice and something that cannot be described. It was a sort of knowledge but without any proof. Of course, it was possible she wasn't my mother. After all, the name I had been given in Durban was Palmyear, not Palmyra. But somehow I overlooked the difference between the two words; they seemed near enough for me.

## The Dilemma

But now I had a serious problem on my hands. Supposing she was my mother and had made a bad mistake in her early life and had got rid of the baby in a subtle way. She might have married some other man (not my father) and her secret would be hers only. If such was the case, I could do her untold harm and perhaps wreck her life. She would be disgraced in the eyes of her two children and their lives could also be seriously affected. There was only one thing for me to do. I had to talk to her alone and give her the chance to deny it. And for my part, if she did, I would give her an undertaking to never see her again. I realized, too, that if I succeeded in talking to her alone, she might faint or something like that.

Of course, I could leave at this stage and return to my own life. But the urge was too great. I wanted to know more about myself. And if some man had let my mother down, I wanted to go after him and damage him in some way – even shoot him. But I also realized that, if Mrs Syme was my mother, she would never be a weak woman and faint or do something stupid. To have planned as she must have done, she would have had to be very strong minded. So I decided to find a way to speak to her alone. I continued watching the house. I noticed an elderly gentleman often coming just before tea time and leaving later. He was always accompanied by Mrs Syme to the gate. She would open it for him and he would go out, raise his hat and depart down the road while she closed the gate and walked back down the avenue. The man turned out to be Sir John Grahame of Monargain (?), Newlands. On his next visit I was standing opposite the gate with my newspaper. When he had departed, I approached her as she was closing the gate, raised my hat and said: ‘Excuse me, madam, but I am looking for my mother and as you were a Miss Raubenheimer, I thought you may be able to assist me.’ She did not move a muscle and calmly said she was sorry but could not see how she could assist, but she would speak to her husband and if I would return later, they would see what could be done. I thanked her, raised my hat again, and departed.

I was now faced with a difficult problem. She had not denied being a Miss Raubenheimer. But it was strange that she should speak to her husband unless she had already told him about her early life. And if that was the case, then why had she not returned and taken her baby as she had arranged to do? I decided to make a test. At the appointed hour when I was due to return, I delayed and hid in the station shelter watching. Nothing happened for half an hour. She then appeared at the far end of the avenue and looked up it towards the gate. This she did several times. Then the man appeared a couple of times. He then walked right to the gate and back while she hovered not quite in full view. I now knew that they were very worried. After all, I might never keep my appointment, and it would be hopeless to try to find me. I was now more certain than ever that she was my mother. She must have recognized me either from my likeness to her other son or by some other means. Or perhaps they thought that someone had found out her secret and was about to blackmail them.

## Meeting my parents at last

Whatever the truth, I decided my test was over. I came out of hiding, crossed the bridge and entered the gate. They must have seen me as soon as I opened it. She had disappeared but the man was lounging around. He came up at once and, without greeting me, said his wife had told him about my encounter with her and he wanted to know what it was all about and who I was. I said in response that I was not prepared to discuss anything with him, but only with his wife. At that moment she came along and offered us all to sit on a seat under the trees. They sat one on each side of me. He then told his wife that

I refused to talk to him without her. She promptly said I could say anything to her in the presence of her husband.

I sat there thinking about what to say. I decided to start at the beginning. I asked her if she knew who my mother was. Her husband turned at once and said: 'This is your mother, but I am not your father.' There was silence for a time. Then he said: 'What is it you want, money?' I replied no. He then put another



**John's parents, George and Jemima Syme, in old age**

question. Did I know that my mother had two other children? Did I realize the damage I could cause to my mother and her children? I said that I was quite prepared to leave and never be seen again if my mother so wished. And in any case I intended leaving soon. But I did feel I had the right to know why she had not returned to take her baby when she had said she would. The man answered by saying that her baby had died and that was why. And there was good reason to suspect that I was an imposter. She then cut across this, saying: 'I know he is my boy. Besides he looks like Glanville' (Glanville was her other son). I responded by asking her who my father was. Her husband at once intervened, asking why I wanted to know. 'For no real reason except I may think of killing him,' I replied. 'Did I

know that he was a magistrate and could have me locked up for that?', he said. I said I did not think so because I had not yet committed a crime. Then without warning my mother suddenly said: "This is your father."

I was stunned. I just could not take it in. My mind was already overloaded. I was in a whirl. Here I had found not just my mother, but my father too, and also a sister and brother. I just needed time to let it sink in.

They both saw my distress and suggested we stop now and meet again the next morning. The other children would be away at school. Right now, they were about to return home, and their parents did not want them to see me, all the more so since the girl, Linda, was very observant and clever and might see a likeness between me and her brother, Glanville. Before I left, however, my mother asked me a string of questions. Was I married? Did I have any ties? Also what did I do for a living? And what were my intentions? What name was I using? Where was I staying at the moment? I answered I was not married and had no ties. I was doing engineering as a profession. And my intention was to go overseas and study medicine and become a doctor. And that I had £8,000 from the business which had recently been sold in order to enable me to make my present investigations. I explained that my intention was to return to Durban, invest my money and immediately go overseas with the help of Dr Mackenzie. After telling my mother all this because she had asked, I took my leave.

After reaching my room in the boarding house, I sat at a little table making notes and trying to think out the whole bewildering situation. I had to plan what I should do. And I needed to think out all the questions I intended to ask the next day. I was dead tired and had a restless sleep.

### **Questions answered**

The next day I went again to talk to my mother and father. They were extremely kind this time, but seemed worried. I was armed with a series of questions. The first, again, was why they had not collected



me as a baby when they had undertaken to do so. The answer was that they had planned to do so, even to the extent of getting jobs in the interior well away from all their relations. And once there, they intended changing my age. In the meantime, they had written to the midwife to say they would be calling for the baby soon. But she had then informed them that the baby had died and they received a certificate to that effect. They were so affected by the shock that they packed up and went to England with a view to trying to forget it. When they returned to South Africa, they took up the appointments they had previously arranged, and moved from place to place as they had intended to do in the first place. These appointments were obtained through their old friend, Sir John Grahame, who was head of the department. It gradually became clear that the midwife, having made the serious mistake of accepting money in return for supplying the baby, had found herself in a terrible position. There was nothing she could do to stop them from coming to collect their baby. Hence her plan to switch the girl baby for the boy. She sent the doctored death certificate to my parents. It succeeded and she heard nothing further from them. This deception was also why I had had such difficulty with the midwife's elder daughter. She must have been in her mother's confidence and known what she had done.

The next question I put was: were they married before he was born? The answer was yes and that they had got married twice. I then asked for proof – which I got later. At this point, my mother told me that my name was John and that it was a common name in the Syme family. She and her husband had always referred to me as John, although I had been seldom spoken about as her husband always prevented any discussion of the subject. She, it seems, always hankered to go to Durban and visit the grave but he would not hear of it. He was a powerful-minded man and very fair. He approved now of my wanting proof of all this. And he actually eventually wrote out a certificate stating that I, John, was his eldest son. But it took several days of discussion between the three of us to clear up all the most important events of the past 20 years and more.

### **A brother and sister**

It was now decided that I should be introduced to my sister Linda and brother Glanville. My parents told me afterwards how the two children were got together one evening and told of the unfortunate happenings and how the brother they had never even known existed had now turned up, and that they were to meet him the next evening. Glanville accepted it all. He made no comment except to go up to his mother and put his arm around her and say he was sorry to hear of the suffering she must have had and that he would be happy to meet me. Linda, on the other hand, though she accepted the situation, kept saying: "I knew it.... I told you so many times, only I got his name wrong." It was strange that Linda had been so determined that she had a missing elder brother. After all, there was no way she could have known her mother's secret. It no doubt happens sometimes that children imagine things and like to believe them for a while, but this was different; what she had imagined was true.



**Mrs Jemima Syme and her offspring – John, Linda and Glanville – at Palmyra Estate, Claremont, 1920s**

The next evening, Linda and Glanville were told to wait in the dining room, while I was with our parents in the sitting room. First, Linda was called by her mother. She came in and walked across the room, not being quite sure at first what to do. I extended my hand. She took it and gave me a light kiss and said she was glad to have her elder brother at last. With that, Glanville came in. He marched up, extended his hand, and we shook hands firmly. All he said was: “Welcome home, John”. This little sentence carried with it something not easy to describe. It seemed to weld us two boys together in some strange way. It seemed to wash away the missing past. It made this boy more to me than any others had ever been.

After these greetings we all had an excited discussion. There were still many difficulties. How were Mr and Mrs Syme to explain their eldest son’s sudden appearance to his aunts Mrs Gadd and Mrs Fisher, both sisters of my mother? And also to my cousins and other relations, the elderly great aunts, Mrs. Impy (my father’s sister), and to my grandmother and their numerous friends who all knew only of Linda and Glanville? This was a weighty problem.

As for me, I had made up my mind to leave the next evening for Durban in order to fix up my affairs. I also would not agree to come home at once after this. I wanted to think things over. The problem of explaining things to all the relations and friends could cause a lot of gossip and damage to the family. There was also the question of my medical training. Was it not better if I did not come home, but went overseas instead? This would give my people lots of time to let their friends and relations know about me. What should I do for the best? On the other hand, there was another consideration. I had been told of my father’s rather serious illness. He had a constricted carotid artery. He had had a number of

operations in Switzerland over a period of nearly eight years. These had cost a lot of money and had reduced the Syme finances to danger point.

My father agreed that, for now at least, I should go back to Durban, arrange my affairs, and then decide whether I would like to come and live at home with them, or go overseas and only return some years later. This was to be my decision. My father putting the choice on me gave me a great feeling of trust and faith in him. I realized him to be a man of fairness, kind, and willing to have confidence in me. He also had an iron will if necessary. He was just the sort of man I could be proud of.

So I left for Durban. Glanville saw me off. He struck me as a manly sweet-natured boy. After all, he could have felt that my return had taken his place in the family from him. And that suddenly here was someone he might have to listen to – which might not be to his liking. But if these thoughts ever crossed his mind, he never showed it. Rather he behaved as though the situation was quite the reverse. There was something great between us two boys. We were proud of each other, but without directly having to tell each other.

### **An Unexpected blow**

When I reached Durban, I told the Missus that I had found my mother, father, sister and brother. Although I did not want to hurt her in any way, I refused to give her any details except for my real name. The next thing I did was go to where Widderson lived in order to settle up the money from our sale of the business, and to invest my share. When I got there, the place was vacant. On enquiring, I was told that he and his family had left a week or two earlier. To cut a long story short, Widderson had cleared out and left the country taking all the money, and even leaving some debts unpaid. This was a terrible shock. There was nothing I could do, just nothing. I tried to get Widderson stopped at Madeira but it was war time. If anyone tried to get anything done in war time, they would find it was just hopeless. Anyway, to cut a long story short, Widderson was eventually traced. He was found to have been killed in France.<sup>29</sup> As for the woman with him, she was said to have been a runaway foreign princess and nothing was ever heard of her – or my share of the money – again.

I was now in a difficult position. I did not know what to do. Every day I got a letter from my mother, mostly imploring me to come home. I wrote to my father and told him what had happened and that I had not yet decided what to do. He replied to say how sorry he was but that he was surprised I had not left my affairs in the hands of a competent lawyer. I spent a couple of weeks sitting on the beach all by myself trying to think out some plan. It was clear that I had lost all hope of being able to afford a medical training. I could go back to my old company and work for it again, but this did not appeal. And there were my mother's letters imploring me to come home and saying that my father's health was getting worse and he might have to go for another operation fairly soon. I began to feel that perhaps it was my duty to go home and do what I could there. Besides, I just wanted to get away from Durban.

So I decided to go back to Cape Town. But I had many things to do before doing so. I got rid of all my things other than my hand tools. I burnt all my diplomas and papers because they were in the wrong name. I paid all the outstanding debts which Widderson had left unpaid. And I went to see Mr Joe Borain, the managing director of the African Marine and General Engineering Works, and explained that I had changed my name and asked him for a reference. He gave me an open letter of introduction with a nice recommendation. I then saw my old friend Cecil Wickes at the works, told him about my new name, asking him to keep it to himself, and said good-bye without telling Cecil where I was bound for. I also

went to see another friend, Fritz Keit, who lived with his parents off Berea Road. They were the most charming old people and I had spent many evenings, days and holidays with them. Lena, Fritz's eldest sister, was a wonderful woman. She was very much older than her brothers and bossed them. She took care of the rather large house and looked after her old parents until they died. She had once been in love with a man for many years, but neither ever married. She would never leave her parents. I said goodbye to them and finally to the Missus and Bob, to whom I gave my new address. I also saw Carne before leaving. Finally, I sold my Ariel motorcycle to the boilermakers' foreman in the old works.

## 6. A new kind of family life



**Palmyra Estate – Jemima Syme, John's mother, taking tea, 1921**

I finally left Durban with all my clothes and effects in a couple of suitcases. On arriving in Cape Town I was met by Glanville. At home I got a great welcome. There was a room for me. I just tumbled into place as the eldest son of the Syme family at once. Things soon began to happen. My father and mother had

already told their friends and relations that their eldest son who had completed his Engineering studies in Durban was expected home soon. If people were surprised – and no doubt most were – they were up against two very clever and strong-minded people. My mother was a woman of wonderful presence. She had great charm, reserve and command. She would respond perhaps: "Oh, didn't you know? Well, no doubt, you wouldn't have as we are not accustomed to discuss our family. However I shall be pleased to invite you to meet him on his return" – and she would pass on to some other subject. My father, too, had great strength of mind and would brook no questions. Although they had many friends and lived a fairly social life, their friends were never so intimate as to be able to take liberties. They were also helped by the fact that they had moved about a lot during their lives and lived in different places in the country. The relatives, however, were more of a problem. My aunts on my mother's side, Aunt Helen (Mrs Gadd) and Aunt Linda (Mrs Fischer), were very suspicious, particularly Aunt Helen.

I soon started to meet all these people and it was a bit tricky. Afternoon tea parties were given where I was introduced. A big garden party was held. Fortunately I had had a social training, although I must admit I was not at all keen on social functions of any sort. Anyway, I was closely observed of course, but I was able to cope with the situation easily.

After all the fuss was over and I had taken my rightful place, and had got to know my new surroundings, I thought about working again. I still had a couple of hundred pounds out of the Durban wreck, but it was dwindling. I soon found employment in an engineering works in Cape Town in Chiappini Street near the docks. It was the Clyde Engineering Company and I got on very well there. At one point, volunteers were called for to work for the war effort in Simonstown. I did so. After the work was completed, I was back at the Cape Town works.





**Mrs Jemima Syme, with her younger son, Glanville, 1930s?**

Meanwhile, my father got worse and had to go overseas for another operation. I was offered the chance of going too but refused. I let Linda go instead although both she and Glanville had been before. But I felt that these trips were very costly, funds were running low, and my time would be more profitably spent earning and contributing to the family finances. My father arranged to pay an allowance for running the house, to which I added my salary.

#### **Glanville, my younger brother**

One result of this was that we two boys were left at home (Glanville was still at school) while the rest of the family were overseas. Poor Glanville always said that it was as hard to get money out of me as it was to have a tooth drawn. He had never had to trouble himself about money before as his mother rather spoiled him. He had no sense of the value of money, and spent liberally. So I had a hard job on my hands. I insisted that he cut down his expenses. He took it with a reasonably good grace once he understood the necessity of doing so. The War was going on strongly and things were difficult. But one day I returned home after work to find a note from Glanville telling me he was sorry to leave me alone, but he had joined the army. Well, I was

not having this. The boy was still a minor and at school. He had not got his father's permission. I got the help of

Canon Jenkins who was the Principal of the Diocesan College where Glanville was a pupil. We got into touch with the military people. After a lot of trouble, it was found that he had been sent to Potchefstroom for training. He was sent back home. He was a bit disgruntled when he arrived. But after a good talk, I promised to help him get permission to go overseas for a proper training at Sandhurst, the British Army's principal officer training college. Glanville then settled down nicely and there was no more trouble. In due course our parents and Linda got back from overseas. The operation had been successful. But our father had been told that he must put his house in order since he was not likely to live long. This was a great shock for the family. But he was a very brave man and behaved as if nothing had happened. As for Glanville, he got his wish and was sent off to Sandhurst. He did well there and eventually got a commission. He joined the Seaforth Highlanders because of his Scottish descent and soon had the rank of Captain.

### **I lose my father after such a short acquaintance**

While I was still working for the war effort at Simonstown, I suddenly didn't feel too bright. I had been working in a ship's engine room and foolishly went up to the bridge to cool down. It turned out that I had contracted rheumatic fever. This is a terrible thing to have and very painful. I was laid up for some time. Just as I was recovering and back on my feet, although still having to stay indoors, my father became much worse. I was called to his bedroom because he wished to talk to me alone. Once I was settled at the bedside, he told me that he was dying and did not expect to live more than a day or two. He wished to give me instructions for the future. He asked me to do all I could for the family as I would now be its head. In particular, he wanted me to promise to take care of my mother as long as she lived. He said he could die happily only if I promised to. There was nothing I could do in the circumstances but promise. But it was all a big shock. I had not been aware of the exact state of affairs. No one had even told me how poor my father's health had become. I only knew it at the last moment, by which time he was living on morphine. The next day he died saying goodbye to his wife and telling her that I would take care of her. At this moment, I was still so unwell I could not go to his funeral, but had to watch it through the front room window.

Things settled down again slowly. I recovered but the doctor warned me that although I had a strong heart I was not to do any work that involved great exertion for at least a year or two. This was a blow as I was a very active young man. After seeing some advertisement, I decided to start my own model engineering concern. I bought a few machines and tools and set up a small works. The building was on the Syme property and was big enough to hold about two cars. I had a small office attached. I imported castings and fittings for model engines, Dynamo's pumps and all sorts of things. I advertised in various papers. The work was light and involved mostly sitting at a bench. Orders soon came in. And then more and more of them. It is quite true that fathers buy toys for their children to play with themselves. Business became quite good but not on nearly a large enough scale. Since my heart had now mended completely, I undertook heavier work. I took in motor car repairs. This was a much better business and there were good prospects. I also got other kinds of machine work from all over the place. Things were beginning to look up businesswise.

### **Linda, my new sister**

On the home front, things were more complicated. Linda was singing and entertaining soldiers on the Parade. She had a lovely voice and was a pretty and clever girl. She did a lot of good work for the troops passing through. But she did give me a headache with all her boyfriends. She had frequent love affairs. Some were extremely nice men. But there were incidents which I did not think funny at the time. On one occasion, Linda and a couple of girlfriends visited a ship in the Cape Town docks. After a wonderful evening they returned home by the last train around midnight. When they got there, one of the girls found she had left her bag on the ship. It was due to sail at daybreak. The girl was also sailing for England on some other ship the next day and the tickets were in her bag. Of course, I had to be hauled out of bed. I got out my Ariel motor cycle and went after the bag. It took some explanation for me to get on board the ship. No one, including the Captain, was pleased to be disturbed at that hour. But the bag was found. When, however, I got as far as the dock gates again, I was stopped. A shower of questions followed; one must remember this was war time and things were not too easy.

Linda had amongst her many boyfriends a young Naval officer. Their love making used to extend to the last second before his train left. He would dive for the train and leap on as it was moving out. One

night they misjudged it and he missed his train. He was bound to get into trouble at the other end. So once again, I was hauled out of bed. I must lend the man my motor cycle. It was the only way to save him from trouble. I very reluctantly got my machine out. The boyfriend shot off, saying that he would return the machine next day. Two days later a cart arrived with a motor cycle on it reduced to scrap iron. I was not pleased. When the young man's ship left Simonstown, I said thank goodness. In any case, Linda had been engaged to a man in England for some time, who was believed to be a very good match. But for some reason Linda's mother broke it up.

### **More complications – My mother**

Other things were also happening. Serious things. My mother started selling off bits of land from the Palmyra estate. I found that she had been sending money to Glanville in England. And she was generally spending far too lavishly. My father had left everything to his wife. This left me with no handle at all. I began to feel that he should have left me with some means of control. I went to the executors and found that nothing could be done to stop her spending all that was hers by law. The executors themselves could do nothing. She was a proud woman and was thoughtless about money. My father had been the only one able to control her. I implored her not to spend so lavishly. I suggested she rather sell the whole estate which was worth about £8,000 or £10,000, buy a smaller house and invest the balance. I also suggested all her three children should earn their living. (It was about this time that Glanville came home on a year's sick leave. He had got a German bayonet through the thigh.) If any of the children ever needed a shelter, she would at least have a home for them. This suggestion of mine touched her pride and she simply would not hear of it. I could see that this mad state of affairs could not last too long. I cut down my own costs and paid a minimum contribution to the household's running costs. But there was no source of income except a few shares which were already set off against loans. She got Mr Frank Molteno, who was a surveyor, to survey and cut up the estate into building plots. She would then sell off another plot when she needed money. She was running through her capital.

### **I decide to get engaged**

There was nothing I could do. So I decided to remove myself and go and live nearby. I could then work in peace and still keep a watchful eye on things. But how to arrange it? I had no apparent reason for leaving and I didn't want to draw attention to the situation and embarrass my mother. So I decided the only thing to do was to marry. I knew a few girls. I had lost my dislike for them although I liked them more as friends. Only one of them, Nesta Molteno, attracted me more than that. She and I became great friends. One day while sitting on the footboard of a car at the works in my white overalls, I proposed to her. She went home to think it over. Later in the day, she rang me and accepted me. We originally thought we would be engaged for a couple of years. But when I broke the news to my mother – Gosh! All hell was let loose. She reminded me that I had undertaken to take care of her for the rest of her life. She added that I was never to marry until she was gone. I had never thought it would be like this. However she had a thing about her sons. Glanville was her blue-eyed boy and I meant everything to her even if she found me very difficult. She was by this time past her 45<sup>th</sup> year. Although we boys did not realize it at the time, she had changed in one direction: "her boys".





**John Syme about the time he and Nesta Molteno got engaged**

She did not bother about Linda. Linda could almost do as she liked while we boys were watched like a cat watches mice. There were no girls in the world good enough for them. Once when she gave a party in the grounds for a number of young people, a girl climbed into a hammock which was strung high up. When she wanted to come down, she jumped. Somehow she landed flat on her tummy and was winded. Being nearby I picked her up and laid her on a garden seat and dabbed her forehead with a wet cloth. Mother came along and told me to leave the girl alone and go away, or she would never recover from the faint.

#### **My mother's reaction**

Glanville she did not mind so much as he had numerous girlfriends and talked of safety in numbers. But when I got actually engaged to a girl, that was different. She started at once to break it up. When my girl came to see her, she would be polite and appear kind. But in a subtle way she would make the girl feel she had stolen something. And she would take every chance to say something cutting, which would make the girl feel she wanted to run miles away. So it was that no girl would willingly come into the lioness's den.



**Nesta Syme (nee Molteno), with her and John's daughter, Valerie**

I soon found out the reason for her behaviour from a doctor friend. But nothing could be done about it. I had to make the best of it. Luckily, I could handle things quite well. She could not break me down. I had a mind of my own. I did not lose my temper and walk out. I simply treated her quietly and disarmed her time and again. I also tried to get my girl to cooperate with me on this. But Nesta had already begun to hate her and refused. So she saw my mother much less. It was my habit to go to see her on Saturday afternoons as I was working hard all week and often at nights. When my mother saw that she could do nothing to break our relationship up, she started new methods of attack. I had bought a small Singer two-seater car and looked forward to my Saturday afternoon visits to my girl. Each week my mother tried to find some reason to prevent my going. A part of the grounds might catch fire about Saturday lunch time and all hands had to carry water to put it out. Indeed it would often take all afternoon and sometimes well into the night to do so. This was because the grounds were in places a foot deep in leaf mold and when the fire got into this, it was most difficult to put out as it burned under the surface and popped up in all sorts of unexpected places. On one or two occasions people living on the boundaries of the property called the fire brigade which stood

by watching in case the nearby houses became endangered while we two boys and Linda carried buckets of water and beat out the fire. This always happened on a Saturday afternoon. Both Linda and I were sure it was our mother who was at the bottom of it. However she was never caught doing it. It was of course an awful time for her as she was experiencing a change of life. She was quite her normal wonderful self in every other way except where it concerned her boys. But I could not let this firebug business continue and I got old Kilsen, the gardener, to clear all the leaf mold and dry grass and burn it.

Then trouble broke out in a new direction. All sorts of unpleasant things began to be whispered around. Like the girl's parents were allowing their daughter to deceive me. Or because they had some independent income, they really wanted a nice boy for their daughter, not me. This kind of rumour was designed to push me away from my girl and end our engagement. This new development put me in a most difficult position. My girl's family knew where the talk came from, but they could not say anything to her as they had no direct proof. And I was right in the middle of it all. You might think I should have just let them all go to hell. But in my particular circumstances, such a course of action was out of the question.

First of all, I had been without my family for over 20 years. Having found them now, I wanted to make up for it and share my life with them. Also, just because difficulties had arisen, why should I run away, particularly since I had made undertakings to my father which could not be undone? What's more, if nature makes things difficult for a person, that is all the more reason to stand by and do your best. Just imagine if I had backed out of the situation, and my mother had jumped off the end of a pier. How could I have lived a happy life knowing that I could have prevented it? No, it was not so easy. It is true that I had done much more for my family than they ever gave in return – all except Glanville perhaps, because he had to hold back all the way. Linda fared badly too as I always felt that our mother held me away from her, either directly or through not letting my girlfriend meet her if she could, and making it appear to be my girl who was at fault. And the pressure was continuous – things can look very different if one is under a constantly dripping tap. Anyway my girl came to hate my mother. She could not understand the basic reason for the woman's hostility, or cooperate with me to overcome it. Her parents, who were kind and gentle people, also disliked her intensely but they did all they could not to make things worse.

### **Nesta Molteno's family**

Frank Molteno was one of the goodest of men. He was kind and gentle, most polite and upright. Everyone he ever met was a friend of his. He was a very hard worker in his surveying profession. And he belonged to a very fine old Cape family who were well known, even if it was very clannish. As I often said, it must have been 700 strong; at least it seemed that way when I had to meet them all!

### **Claremont House – the old family home**

The old family home<sup>30</sup> was situated some distance from the Main Road in very large and beautiful grounds. It was named Claremont House. It was a very large, single-storey house of old-fashioned construction with thick walls built of mostly soft brick and under a thatch roof. Most of the rooms were very large and spacious. The drawing room, in particular, was immense. It had two bow windows and at the further end opened into a glass conservatory well stocked with plants. At night, the room could feel a bit eerie if you were alone in it. The piano stood in the far corner. If you sat at it playing, with your back

to the room, after a little while you would feel some sort of presence and the hairs on the back of your neck would be somehow affected. But if you looked round, there was nothing to see. Nevertheless, it wouldn't be long before you closed the piano and got out!



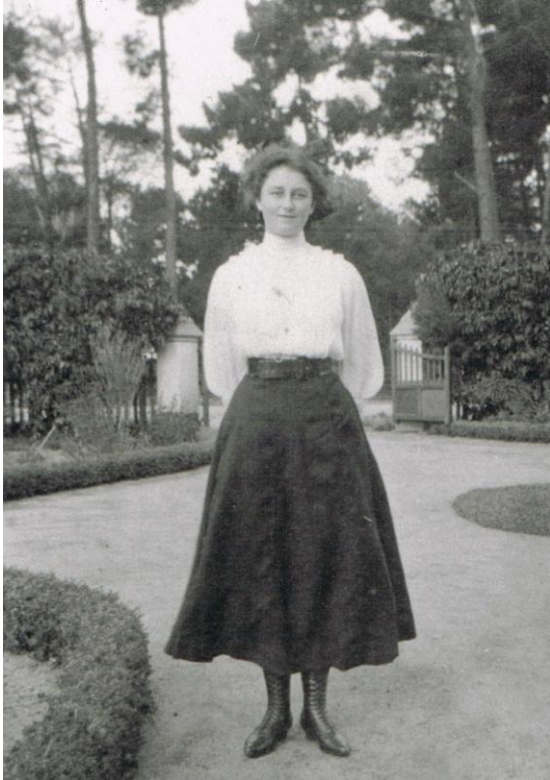
**The drawing room, Claremont House**

I don't remember the history of this grand old house. But there was a history.<sup>31</sup> Several stories were told of strange happenings, both in the house and in the grounds at night. One was that some visitors from next door had paid a visit one evening. On their return through the grounds accompanied by their friends, they took a short cut by way of a wicket gate separating the two properties. On approaching the gate, one of the ladies drew back to allow, as she thought, some other lady from the other side to

come through first. But when she looked round to see who it could be, she was badly disturbed to see that the lady had completely vanished. Her friends immediately urged her not to worry as she had only seen "The Grey Lady", a phantom quite well known about the grounds. For my part, I never saw The Grey Lady.

There were other weird things about the house. A tremendous crashing in the night took place occasionally when all was quite quiet. It only happened rather seldom. It sounded for all the world like a person carrying a load of plates and glasses, cups and saucers and tripping over something and the whole lot crashing to the floor. The noise would be heard by not just one person but almost everyone in the house. The servants would be seen peeping out of their doors and others did the same, looking about to see what had happened. And yet there was nothing amiss.

Another strange thing was the behaviour of Brenda's pet dog. Brenda was Nesta's sister, and the elder daughter of Frank and Ella Molteno. The dog was a sort of wire-haired terrier. Brenda was very fond of it, and he of his mistress. Brenda had a room on the right-hand side of a long passage near the entrance hall. The strange thing was that it was difficult to induce the dog to enter the room. If he did, however, he would walk slowly as if on tip toe and with his hair all up. And when he got out of the room, he would dash outside screaming all over the grounds. After a short time, he would calm down and be quite normal again. The reason for this behavior was never discovered.



**Brenda Molteno, Nesta's elder sister**

Yet another strange thing about the house was that it had a very long, rather narrow passage with a series of empty rooms opening on to it, including a box room. At the end the passage continued round a corner to the lav. No one was happy to go down this passage after dark. It produced a powerfully eerie feeling; there was no reason for this, one just got this strange feeling which was not to be easily described. Mr Frank Molteno, however, never felt anything of the sort. I can only think that perhaps he was a man of super faith. It seems to me that the nearer to Godliness one is, the less this sort of thing affects you.

### **Things get worse**

Things for Nesta and me were getting worse all the time. The two families involved became more strained with each other. Talk became more aggressive. Albeit under a cloak of friendliness, my mother had a mind of blue steel and a commanding presence seldom met with. More than once when she had been invited to tea by Mrs Molteno and the huge drawing room at Claremont House was full of friends and relations all chatting and drinking tea, she would arrive, but late.

There would be the general hum of voices and usual sound of tea cups. Suddenly a dead silence and in the doorway she would appear – upright, calm and commanding,. Everyone seemed spellbound until Mrs Molteno, our hostess, approached and welcomed her. My mother would then give a slight lowering of the head to others nearby and take her seat with great grace. Only then would the chatting begin again and things return to normal. I often watched this happening and wondered what most affected the others present. Some, no doubt, admired her for she was a very good-looking woman, tall and highly refined. She had perfect manners. She was never at a loss. She would converse in a quiet even voice which carried a sense of authority demanding the respect and attention of the person she was addressing. She was a truly remarkable woman. Even those who may have hated her could do nothing in her presence. I was convinced that she herself never knew her tremendous power.

I, however, did know her power and could defeat it in my own way. This was mostly likely why she resorted to other ways to defeat me in my love affairs. She was definitely not used to being defeated herself. She had many friends but no friend, no matter how dear, would ever dream of taking any liberties with her. She also made many enemies, they being mostly those of a lower station in life than her. She also always insisted on her rights. For example, one day she found a woman walking through her property. She had sold a piece of ground on the fringes of the estate. The people had built their house on it, but to get to Palmyra Road or Claremont Station, they had to walk right round. If however they just came over their back fence through our estate, it was a short walk. If this woman had asked permission, it would have been better although she never would have got it. Anyway, my mother met her within a few paces of the road. After talking to her a couple of minutes, she made her go all the way back and with instructions to repair the fence and not attempt it again. The result, as can be imagined, was that this woman hated her.



It seems a great shame that a woman's state of health at a certain time in life should affect her to such a degree. If the same incident had happened before my mother turned 45, the other woman might have gone home with the highest opinion of this charming lady who was only determined to protect her property from thieves who might use the back way to steal from her back yard and possibly burgle her home. And she might also have come away with the idea that, if she used the long way round, she would be advancing the tone of the area and raising the value of her own house a bit.

Things got worse and worse. Home became more and more difficult for me. I constantly had to hear how girls tried to trap men, how rotten everything was, how I was throwing my mother to the dogs and breaking the honorable promises I had made to a dying man – all because of a girl. There was no point in entering into arguments or quarrels. The only way to defeat her was to appear to listen carefully, say nothing, and do whatever little courtesies and kindnesses were possible. I would arrange the cushions for her. I would take her by the arm and walk up and down the avenue. She would return to normal and things would be pleasant for a time. Then it would all start up again.



**John Syme & Nesta Molteno's  
wedding, Claremont House, 12  
January 1921**

Poor Nesta, she had a terrible time. She could feel the utter bitterness. She could not understand this apparently fearful woman. She was beaten by it all the time. She could see no possible reason why my mother should behave in this amazing way. She also felt that it was really my duty to protect her against my mother. This was quite right in normal circumstances, but the circumstances were not normal. I had undertaken to my father to care for her at the time he was dying. Also I could not risk my mother injuring herself, which she had threatened to do a number of times.

### **The Wedding**

Nesta was a brave girl to stand up to all this nasty talk and unhappiness. She and I decided to stick together. Eventually, things got so bad that we decided to get married at short notice. We discussed it with her parents. They agreed and could see that perhaps my mother would settle down once we were actually married. So everything was arranged. But when I told my mother of our intentions, the roof nearly blew off. She went on and on saying nasty things and trying to stop me. But she could not. She went on opposing our

marrying right up to the moment I and Glanville – who was my best man – left to go to the church. I by this time had lost my deep-seated love for her. Something seemed finally to have broken inside me. There only remained my sense of duty. This was difficult because it meant I had to keep my feelings to myself.

The wedding was a very big one. The reception was held at Claremont House, Nesta's home, which suited very well as it was such a large and beautiful place. My mother did attend. She dressed in black lace over a whitish silk or satin [dress], with a wide-brimmed hat also trimmed. She looked very charming and mixed with all the guests as if no storm had ever existed. Nesta and I left for our honeymoon. But we found that our suitcases had been padlocked so that we could not open them. The keys were sent on the next day. Whoever was responsible, however, had not thought that I was used to locks and was able to pick them easily. So the 'joke' was a damp squib.



**Claremont House, as it was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century**

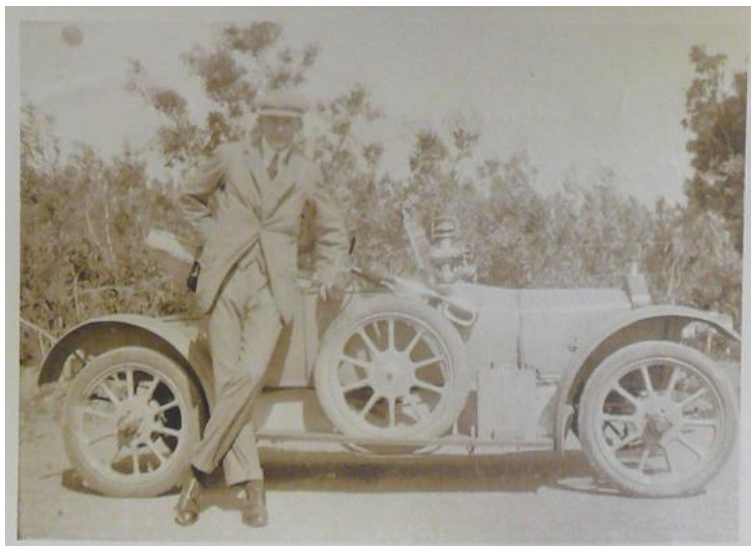
## 7. Married life – Nesta Molteno and me

After three or four days of our honeymoon, my mother, Linda and Glanville turned up unexpectedly and stayed the afternoon! The visit was a bit strained but nothing direct was said. Nesta and I heaved a sigh of relief after they had gone. When we got back from our honeymoon, however, things were even worse. My mother started a new angle of attack. She would go to our new home while I was at work and attack poor Nesta, saying the most unjust things and calling her names. It was terrible. I went to see her at once and warned her that I would leave the Cape with Nesta if she continued like this. She said she was justified in what she was doing because Nesta had robbed her of her son. I then said that I would be justified in abandoning my undertaking to my father. She quietened down after this for a bit.

### Running a business with a brother

My business in the meantime was falling off. I had taken Glanville on as an equal partner. At first things went well. Though Glanville knew nothing of engineering, he did take a lot of the office work off me. Also he was good at going out and getting new custom. In fact, we worked very happily together.

Glanville had numerous girlfriends. They soon started to ring him up. Sometimes when I answered the phone I would hear “hallo darling” and I would respond “hallo darling, how nice to hear you”, meanwhile waving to Glanville who would take over without the girl knowing of the change! Our voices were rather alike over the phone. Sometimes we would even have a game. Sitting one on each side of the desk, Glanville would have a loving conversation with one of his girls and in the middle of it he would hand the phone to me and I would continue the conversation. But these phone calls became a nuisance. They were interfering with the business. So I played a trick on him one time. I answered all the calls but did not call Glanville over. Instead I made loving appointments with all of them to have tea on Saturday afternoon. I then told Glanville that one of his girls would be coming to tea. When the time came the girls arrived one after the other. Poor Glanville had to cope with each girl thinking she was the apple of his eye. The following Monday morning when Glanville came into the office, we laughed until the tears ran down our faces. The number of calls was from then on reduced by asking them to ring him in the evenings.



**John Syme with one of his hire cars, Cape Town, 1920s**

Business was steady. But then Glanville wanted me to buy secondhand cars on credit, repair them and re-sell them. I would not agree to this because I knew that Glanville was far too free with money. Besides I never dealt with people on a credit basis without suitable backing. So Glanville insisted on going into this line of business himself. I found this most unsatisfactory as it took up all his time and our main business suffered. We discussed the matter and could not agree. So we decided to call in an

arbitrator who had, however, to be a friend of the family so as to avoid outside talk. I did not like this but had to accept. A Mr Delaport, an old friend of the family, was chosen by our mother. He knew nothing at all about business and less still about engineering. He gave a verdict in Glanville's favour: Glanville could do his side line, but would pay 10% of the profits to the works. This was useless. If I had to run the works on this basis, I would be broke in a month or two. Besides, Glanville was to be allowed to complete all his new line of work before spending any time on our more profitable business. This was necessary so that he could have time enough to sell the cars and pay off the money he was borrowing to buy them. He also shared in the 10%! By this time, my mother had again started attacking Nesta. Now she also blamed me for trying to stop Glanville making money so that he could assist her in my stead.

By this time I was almost desperate. I could see the writing on the wall. I had another talk with my mother and Glanville, but got no satisfaction. So I told them I was leaving and that I would not be responsible for anything further. I would leave my money in the business and Glanville could carry on as he thought fit. There was a great blow up. She told me that Glanville had no mechanical knowledge – which of course was obvious – and that it would be disaster for him if I left. I pointed out that he already relied on the staff and workmen and could go on doing so.

Nesta and I packed up and left by train for Durban. We stayed with the Missus for a few weeks. I showed Nesta round the city but she hated the place and was very unhappy to be away from Cape Town. For my part, I was keen to look for something to do and get started again in Durban. But she was so unhappy and the last thing I wanted was for my wife to be unhappy. By this time my nerves were a bit worn too. Then it became clear she was going to have a baby – which didn't improve things. At last I asked her if she could ever live there and she said she couldn't and wanted to be in Cape Town with all her friends and relations. So I said let's pack and leave at once. The next day we were on the train bound for Cape Town. The last we saw of Durban as the train pulled out of the station was a small doubledecker tram bobbing along the road next to the line. It looked quite mad and we had a good laugh.

### **Our own home; my own business**

On our arrival we found a house well away from my mother but not too far from my work. The business was now in a very bad way. I arranged for us to move to a big old forage store in Kenilworth and convert it into a garage and repair works. Glanville moved his sideline business in too. But I agreed with him that he should run his sideline entirely by himself and I would run the engineering and repair business on my own. This meant that we would not be partners anymore, but we would work in the same premises. By this time I had very little cash left and things were serious. Then one day I discovered that Glanville had been waving a cheque about worth £1,000. It was signed by his mother! I at once went to question her. I found that she had been pouring money into his business and had further bonded her property to do so. I got no joy out of her. She simply told me that, as I had abandoned her, I could have no interest in what she did with her money and since Glanville stood by her, she would help him.

I then had a talk with Glanville. He told me that, in order to help his mother, he had to make money. This required capital and he was very hopeful of success. I warned him that his spending habits and business methods were bound to fail. He said he wanted to run a taxi business alongside his secondhand car sales. I actually thought this quite a good idea. But I knew I would be better not joining him again in a shared business. I really did not want to be involved in any way. I now got an option on some nice premises in town where I could move and get away from Glanville. I would much rather help him from a



distance if required. He was already using the goodwill I had built up among our customers. I did not mind this except that it could involve me if things went wrong.

When I told him that I intended leaving Kenilworth and going to town, he thought I was taking unfair advantage of him. So I offered him the option of coming along too. I also offered to help him to establish himself by hiring him the two or three cars he had got to test out his new line of business. He accepted and moved his business to Cape Town. He was very busy and developed the business rapidly. He seemed to be doing well.

In the meantime I struggled with my business. When I got it going eventually, I sold out after arranging with a financier to build me a new garage a little further down the road. I also decided to try out a new venture of my own. This was hiring cars to members of the public to drive themselves. No such service had existed in South Africa before. Few people could afford to buy a motor car.<sup>32</sup> But they might hire one if they needed to. One problem, however, at this point in time was that most clients had first to be taught how to drive. But this could be an additional source of revenue. My new business developed in many directions. One was that as people became more car minded they might buy the car on which they had learned to drive. Later they might hand the car back as a trade-in on a new car which I could arrange for them through a car showroom and get a fair commission. This trade grew rapidly. But I did have great difficulty financing the whole thing and struggled like mad.

I had to buy secondhand cars in order to get enough cars for what I needed. I was also afraid there might be competition from someone with more capital than me and that they could supply customers with new cars. My older cars would then lose out. Another worry was that I was the first to start this type of business and if I failed to meet the demand, others would be sure to start up. I also got quite a demand from clients living outside Cape Town. This made another difficulty as cars had to be delivered and collected from long distances. This took time and cost fuel, and so reduced profits. So I made an agreement with Glanville that he was not to enter into competition with me in the drive yourself line and I would not compete with his taxis. I also made him an agent. This meant he would earn a reasonable commission and not have to run to and from Kenilworth. Things worked smoothly for a time except that I was desperately in need of more cars. But I had not the funds for more, and I would never buy cars on credit. So I had to make do with what I had.

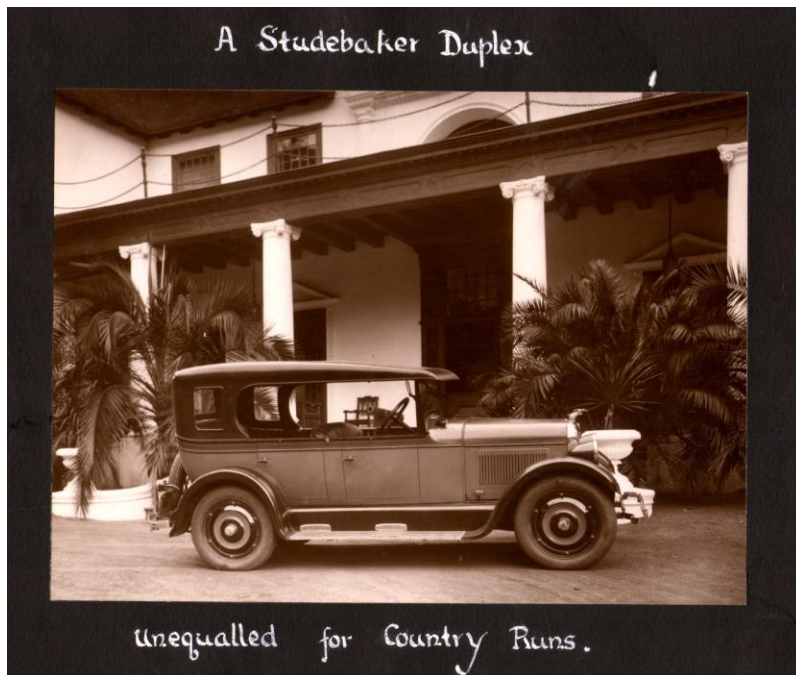
My domestic troubles had not ended. My mother continued to be unpleasant to Nesta. The fat was always in the fire. When our daughter, Valerie, was born, she was the darlinest baby. But she started life with the greatest of difficulty. She had to be fed special foods. Poor Nesta and I got little rest. Eventually, she recovered and put on weight and became a beautiful baby. I adored her. But the fact remained that Nesta had done more than her fair share and both of us were almost worn out by our troubles. My mother was still battering away and the business was desperate.

The two of us also had to do some quick thinking as the owners of the house in which we were living were coming back soon. We decided to buy a piece of land and build a small house in Newlands Road. We got a builder who should never have been allowed to build houses. I always said that if you sat at the dining room table having lunch with your hat on, it would blow off even with the front door closed. In fact one morning Nesta and I had to go out into the road behind the house collecting the tiles which had blown off the roof during a breeze in the night. However this new house was home to us and we had our sunshine in Valerie. There was a nice brass plate on the gate with our chosen name, Katala. This had a hidden meaning. In Zulu it means "tired" and we were both tired, tired of the troubles mostly with my

mother. My luck always seemed against me. As soon as I could see a silver lining, something would happen and batter me down. True, I always bobbed up again. But this kept on happening.

Glanville had a girl in England. He decided to go over and see her. He also had to appear before a medical board in relation to his war wounds and to settle his war pension. While there he married this girl and commuted his pension. Apparently, this got him several thousand pounds. Before he left, I had warned him not to live anywhere near his mother if he married. She had offered to give him ground and build a house for him next to hers. She had in fact offered me ground earlier too which I refused. Glanville was very loyal to his mother and would never understand that she was not normal about her sons. He simply kept out of what he thought were misunderstandings between Nesta and me on the one side, and his mother. So he brushed my warning aside. He accepted her financial help, no doubt with high hopes of repaying her. He had not yet come under her fire. So how could he know? He was however about to learn. I had also warned him that he was spending too lavishly. But he said that, if I had apparently wished to abandon his mother, that was no reason for him to do the same thing. And there the matter ended for the time being.

Glanville came back from England plus wife. They lived with his mother while the house was being built. It was double-storied, quite large, and had a special room intended for her, the idea being that she would live with them and let the old house in which she was living. All seemed to be going well with Glanville's wife, Gladys. In fact, I began to wonder if I had been mistaken. Gladys was a charming girl and I admired her cleverness in dressmaking. She would get a piece of material, cut it, and in no time have a beautifully designed dress. And while my business was struggling, Glanville's seemed to improve a great deal. He was advertising heavily and expensively. I concluded that no doubt he had boosted his business by using the money he had got from the army. He was also giving large theatre parties, in which he always included his mother who loved that sort of thing. I was pleased to think that perhaps Glanville would succeed. He was good at bringing in new business. He was well-liked and popular. No doubt his liberal spending, which I did not think it wise, helped too.



**One of John Syme's hire cars financed by Mr Abrahamson, at the Mount Nelson Hotel, 1930s**

### **Meeting Mr Abrahamson – the stroke of luck**

One day, while I was sitting in my office bothering about how to get more cars, I was told that a man wished to see me. He was invited in and introduced himself as Mr Abrahamson. He said he knew of me in the motor trade and wished to discuss a proposition. He was a Jewish man well over middle age, extremely courteous and polite. He was the senior partner in a large motor firm in Cape Town. His proposal was that I should take up to £10,000 worth of his new cars. I looked at him and said that I hadn't

enough money to buy even one. He replied that he had not asked for money, but would advance me up to £10,000. I could pay for the new cars as and when I thought fit, and without providing security. This seemed mad to me, and I refused the offer thinking there was a catch in it. He then said that he knew I needed cars. He had made enquiries about me and was happy to make me this offer. I should think it over. For his part, he would keep the offer open. And with this, he left.

I started to worry about this mad offer. It was too tempting. There must be a snag. Next day I made a number of enquiries about Mr Abrahamson. All reports were that he was a man of high repute and a straight and fair businessman. But I could not think of how this proposition could be a good business one for him. I then devised a plan to protect myself. I phoned him up and told him that I would accept his offer and would take six cars to start with, with more when the business required them. The six would be worth about £3-4,000. But this was on condition Mr Abrahamson put his offer in writing, there was no security required, and I would pay only as and when I thought fit. Mr Abrahamson laughed and agreed to all this, saying it seemed that he trusted me more than I trusted him although the worry, by rights, should be more his than mine. With this the matter was settled.



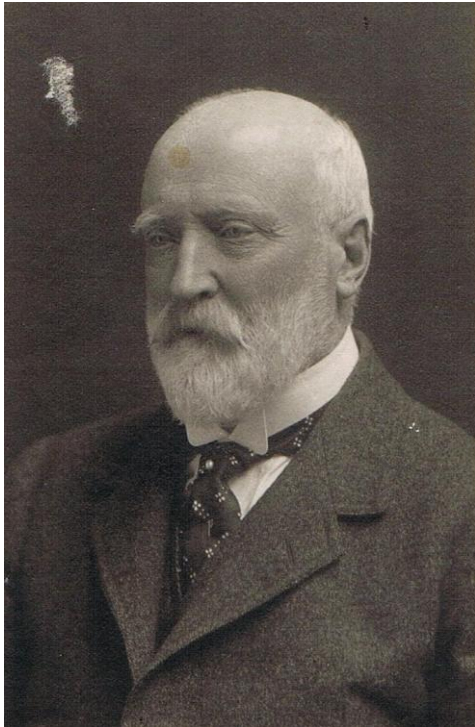
**Another of John's hire cars, parked at the Rhodes Memorial on the slopes of Devil's Peak**

The next day six cars arrived plus Mr Abrahamson. He was as good as his word. He handed me the letter, shook hands, wished me good luck and departed. Soon things began to get much better. Money was coming in at a greater rate. I arranged that all money earned by the new cars, as yet unpaid for, was set aside. When the amount reached a thousand or more, I would draw it in cash, take it in to Abe and empty it on to his desk just for the fun of it. He would start counting it himself, then remember the girls in the next office and call one of them in to do it. The two of us had a good laugh. Abe would order coffee and I would depart after a chat. As time went on, I took many more cars from Abe.

### **My Car Hire business takes off**

Soon the news got about that I was supplying new cars to my clients. Glanville and the family also heard it. But no one knew how I got them. So Glanville rang me up to demand new cars for his agency. I reviewed his account and found him owing me over £800 for past business. So I refused any further cars unless he paid his account. He said he had not got the money to pay and that I would have to wait. And that, if I stopped supplying him with cars, he would break our agreement and put his own cars as he was not prepared to lose business. I told him that, in that case, he would be freeing me up to enter into competition with his taxi hire business. I found a site in town on Somerset Road, got a property investor to build a large garage there, and set up the drive yourself business there, leaving Kenilworth as a branch. I used Abe up to the limit of the £10,000 in new cars, plus what I had already paid for. By now I had a large fleet of very good cars, mostly nearly new. And I started a feeder taxi service. Poor Glanville soon began to regret his move against me. Because of my new cars, Glanville bought a number of new cars on hire purchase. But he soon got into difficulties. His mother raised more money by selling further pieces of the Palmyra property. As for me, I was rapidly getting into a better position. Outside business matters, Glanville and I were always friendly and dropped in on each other for chats.

### **Nesta's father dies in the Salt River Train Disaster**



**Frank Molteno, Nesta's father**

About this time a dreadful tragedy happened. Nesta's father was killed in the Salt River railway disaster.<sup>33</sup> Sometimes one wonders why a man of such goodness should be taken in so terrible a manner. After the shock had passed, life went on as usual again. But there were some changes. Nesta had been left Claremont House in her father's will and her sister, Brenda, had been left the farm, Applegarth, at Elgin. The upshot was that Nesta and I went to live at Claremont House where her mother was now alone. As I mentioned before, Claremont House was a large and eerie house at night. I myself now heard the strange sounds like the crashing of plates. This made me interested to find out the reason. I went up into the attic with torches and searched the whole place. The rough pole timbers supporting the roof were very old and on close examination I found that movement had taken place. What had happened was this. When the weather changed, the roof expanded or contracted. But it did not actually move until the stress reached a limit. Then during the coldest part of the night, one end of the timbers would suddenly give way, thereby setting off the whole roof moving slightly. The differences in weight between the various parts of the roof produced these noises that, combined, sounded like crashing plates. This accounted for people hearing the sounds come from all over the house.

So at last one thing at least was settled!

The old house was rather an expense to run. We decided eventually to build a new home in Newlands Road.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Nesta's mother had a charming house called Shenstone built in Camp Ground Road. Nesta and I, however, were not very lucky about building our house. The first trouble was that



the land turned out not to be virgin soil but the site of an old quarry. The foundations therefore had to go down some 14 feet and this took tons of cement. Then one of the builders broke his neck and died while finishing another job. When the house was about half way up, the remaining builder went broke. But he had used up all the money we had already paid him. There was nothing for it except to go on, with us paying wages and for the materials required. At last the house was finished except for the bathroom floor. This was to be of some wonderful material which would be warm to the feet rather like cork finish. Well, the paste was made up and the floor laid over the concrete. This then had to stand for a few days in order to set. So the door was locked. We hoped we would now be able to move in quite soon. The beautiful teak shutters were all nicely fitted and only a few odds and ends had to be finished. I came after work as usual to see how things were going. To my amazement all the shutters had gone. The firm which had supplied them had taken them off. This was too bad as we had already paid the money they cost to the builders. I forced the firm to return the shutters and told them they could claim from the builders. I then thought to have a peep at the bathroom floor. I opened the door. Gosh! The floor had blown up halfway to the ceiling. Something had gone wrong with the mixture. In the end, we decided to be safe and just have cement.



**Ashlyn House, John and Nesta's house, 1930s – painting by John**

Things seemed to be going better now we had moved into our new house.<sup>35</sup> I was getting more and more contracts. Glanville was spending more and more on advertising but was still losing business to me. One difference between us was that he would take on more custom than he had cars for and thereby disappoint clients. I, for my part, was careful and always kept a reserve of cars. I also ran my business on more organized lines. My cars were in better condition. And I had no trade accounts except with Abe which was safe. But Glanville had numerous accounts, many dating back six months.

### **More troubles with my family**

The first signs of trouble came when my mother had to have the thatch on her roof redone. She could not pay for it. Neither could Glanville. So I landed up paying to avoid my mother being sued. I warned her yet again that she must not depend on me to pay any further outstanding bills. But Glanville remained hopeless with money and careless. He trusted people far too much. He was in the habit of taking a handful of notes from his till and stuffing them into his pockets without bothering about counting them. This left his staff an opening to take as much as they liked, which no doubt they did.

Our mother now started on Glanville's wife, Gladys. She complained to me that, if it was not for Gladys, she would have no money troubles herself! Also that Gladys was taking Glanville away from her as Nesta had allegedly done with me. Gladys had a baby and Glanville was a proud father.<sup>36</sup> Up until then, all had gone fairly well with our mother. But I could see trouble on the way. Once more, I warned Glanville to move out from his mother's place, but he would not hear of it. Instead he just thought Gladys was seeing too much of his mother; so he took Gladys out to shows and drives without her. This infuriated his mother. And she set about breaking up Gladys and Glanville's marriage. The trouble she set up between them may have been subtle, but it ended in Gladys rushing off to England. The marriage had blown up.

One day when I was visiting my mother, she started once again saying nasty things about Nesta and Gladys. I told her outright that I was certain she was responsible for Gladys leaving Glanville. She blew up at that and must have talked to Glanville about it. He never said anything about it to me. But he knew I would never say a thing like that unless I had good reason. He must have looked into things more carefully, but what he found never came out.

A little later he got ill and could not attend to his business. So he called and asked me to keep a watching eye over the business. I agreed to do so. The result was that I worked the whole time on Glanville's business. Luckily, my own could easily run without me for a time. The whole thing was in a frightful mess. There were letters of demand, lots of outstanding accounts and a bank overdraft. There were endless credit accounts owing which were useless. I tried to reorganize the whole thing. First, I put in £1,000 of my own money to straighten out the more pressing demands and the bank. After about a month things were looking a little better. Glanville returned and I handed over to him and told him what I had done. He thanked me and said that I might not get the £1,000 pounds back for some time but he would do his best.

From this point on, Glanville seems to have changed in some way. Whether he had found out that his mother was responsible for his domestic blow up was never mentioned. He just left home and lived in what he called the "dug-out" which was next to his business premises. The excuse he gave was that home was too far from his business. He made friends with dozens of girls and entertained them in the "dug-out". He rather went the pace – he was a fine looking man and very attractive to women, and he

spent freely. Several nice girls fell badly for him, but he had finished with marriage. Of course, he got something of a reputation, and mothers were careful not to let their daughters meet him. Poor Glanville, one of the finest of men, wrecked but still always hopeful of succeeding. Several times he came to my office. He would slap me on the back, "Hallo, old boy". I would ask: "What's the trouble?" or "How much?" And he would reply: "OK. Only a trifle – a £1,000 or so". He would sit down and pull papers out from every pocket. I just could not let this boy go away without the money. We had a sort of understanding which was never made explicit. I knew that if I ever needed assistance, Glanville would have torn everything apart for me. But domestic matters – that topic we left well alone.

Glanville now had a great deal of trouble with his war wounds. On one occasion he was having a lot of pain in his leg. What the doctor didn't realize was that he was actually suffering from appendicitis. He was eventually rushed to hospital and operated on. Meanwhile his business was under inspection, and I tried to see if there were any hopes of turning it round. Just then my mother called me to the hospital. Glanville was seriously ill and he wanted me. I got there but he died a few minutes later.<sup>37</sup> His mother never shed a single tear but began making the funeral arrangements at once. She was an extraordinary person. As for me, I went home. I found Nesta in the bathroom and told her of Glanville's death. She liked Glanville. Had it not been for my mother, we would all have been very happy. Life is strange sometimes.

### **Clearing up the financial mess**

After a week or so I found that Glanville had left his business to me. I looked into it and found that I dare not accept the will. If I did, I would be taking on a debt of something over £10,000. The thing was hopeless. It would have to be sold and his estate declared insolvent. But just as I was refusing to accept the will, my attention was drawn to the fact that my mother's home and effects were also involved. They had been pledged in Glanville's business. I then tried to buy her home and effects separately but the creditors would not accept this. So in the end I went to each creditor separately and made a provisional offer. This saved about £3,000. My mother then sold the remaining property which lessened my outlay a bit more. But I still had to put more money into the bankrupt business than it was worth. And I even had to buy my own assets back. I chucked out all the old worn out cars, got rid of the old staff, re-stocked it with my cars, closed the Kenilworth branch and set the whole thing on a sound footing.

Things were going well again now and I had good hopes of getting back some of my losses. I had avoided my brother's estate going insolvent. My mother now had the balance to live on resulting from the sale of what was left of the Palmyra estate. I made her an allowance and she moved into her daughter, Linda's, house. My own financial prospects were fine. I had almost all the contracts for tourist traffic, all the drive yourself business and a lot of private tours. My capital was about £ 45,000 and I had a fleet of 100 motor cars. But there was still serious trouble with my mother. She grumbled about her allowance and blamed Nesta. Whenever she saw Nesta, she had a dig at her. This sort of thing, when kept up for years, is shattering. Nesta began to blame me for putting up with it. She felt I was protecting my mother more than looking after her who was my wife. Looking back on it, I think she was quite justified in thinking this, particularly as she could never understand my mother's peculiar condition, given she was quite normal in every other way. Meanwhile our daughter, Valerie, was growing up to be a fine strong girl and the apple of her father's eye. She and I had a deep unspoken understanding and complete trust in each other which is hard to describe and which has lasted all our lives.

### **Baby Nancy discovered – and consequences**

At the time of Glanville's death I discovered a newly born baby. I wanted to take this little girl home and bring her up with Valerie. I felt that Valerie would be happy to have a baby sister. I asked Nesta if I could do this and we could rear the baby together. But Nesta refused to have anything to do with it. I was terribly disappointed. It was from this point that she and I seemed to rather drift apart. There seemed to be nothing we could cooperate on as one unit. We began going our separate ways. And yet we remained very fond of each other. No doubt I was difficult. I was not a "yes" man. If I undertook something, I would go through with it. In this instance, I was determined to care of this child. I named her Nancy after my first little pal all those years ago on the Vaal River diggings. I bought a small house at the other end of town and employed a nurse and a companion. The latter was to shield me from scandal when I visited Nancy.

Things went well for a time until whispers of a scandalous nature began. One day two ladies visited me at my office. They were from the Child Life people. They asked me about a hidden baby I had. They wanted the address as they were investigating the case. I admitted that I had a baby, but made clear there was no secret about it and that they were welcome to investigate. I gave them my home address (not the address where Nancy was) and they left. When they had gone, I immediately rang up the nurse and the companion and told them to pack up and be ready to move in a few hours. I then took one of my largest cars, which could carry seven passengers, and rushed the two women and the baby to Stellenbosch. I left them there with instructions to rent a small house for a short time and told the nurse to call herself Mrs Brown. With all the loose ends tied up, I was now ready for any further investigation.

After a couple of days the two ladies turned up again. They were politely invited in and took their seats. They said that I had misled them. They did not want to investigate my daughter at home but some other child I was said to be harboring. I politely asked them if they would be good enough to give the names and addresses of the persons who had told them of this mysterious child. They of course refused. So I said that it seemed to me that it was their duty to find this mystery child and show it to me. I then said the interview was ended and would they please get out of my office as I was busy. Two rather bewildered ladies left the office. I got Nancy, the nurse and the companion back to Cape Town after a month or two and I never heard from the ladies again. To some people, I have seemed a strange sort of person. Certainly, I did things that were rather unusual. But I could not help it. Things came my way and I did what I thought was best. Perhaps my childhood had something to do with it.

I used to go to Durban for short holidays on my own occasionally. I always stayed in Lena Keet's home. Lena was Fritz's sister; he and I had been friends in the early days. Fritz was married and had several small children. On one occasion, Fritz ran away from his family with another woman. I intercepted them in Cape Town, gave Fritz a job and then broke the thing up. I sent the woman home to her children and Fritz back to his. Fritz stuck to his family from then on, but he never had anything more to do with me. Perhaps he was ashamed. As for Lena, she knew what I had done and remained a friend of mine for the rest of her life (she died at about 85 or 86).

### **Taking responsibility for four-year old Daphne**

On one occasion when I was staying with Lena, a tiny little girl, about four years old, mistakenly walked into my bedroom early one morning. She was balancing, just about, a cup of coffee in her hands. When she saw me, she nearly dropped it. I made friends with her. And every morning after that, she brought



me my coffee. She was a pretty little black-haired child, very shy. I met her mother, Mrs Robb. She was a cheery woman, a fortune teller, who rented a room in Lena's house. She told me she did not believe in fortune telling, but did it for a living to keep herself and Daphne. Daphne and I got on well together. She used to watch out for me when I went out. Sometimes I took her for a little drive. When my time in Durban was up, I gave her mother a little money to buy toys with for Daphne. Not long after this visit to Durban, Mrs Robb wrote to me to say she was seriously ill and asking for money as she was destitute. Just as I was preparing to send some, I got a long telegram to say that she had died. And that she had left a letter for me – and Daphne! I wanted Lena to take care of Daphne for me. I jumped into my car and drove like the devil. I reached Durban in 21 hours.<sup>38</sup> The little girl would not leave me for a minute. She just wanted comforting and petting. I made up a little bed for her in my room.

I now had time to think things over. Mrs Robb's letter had given Daphne to me and all her possessions. These were nothing but a couple of trunks, a suitcase of old clothing, and a rosary. I had everything destroyed but kept the rosary for Daphne and a few of Daphne's clothes. I bought new clothes for her with Lena's help. But I was now in a difficulty. I could not just bounce back to Cape Town complete with another child. Things were already highly strained between Nesta and me. So I thought out a plan. I would take Daphne to a Convent in Maritzburg, leave her there, go back to Cape Town, see what arrangements I could make and perhaps bring her down later. I had already told Daphne to call me Daddy and from then on her name was Daphne Syme. She got used to the idea almost at once. I took her to Maritzburg. When we reached the Convent, I asked to see the Mother Superior. When we were settled in a room, Daphne on my lap, I explained that I wanted to place my little girl with them. The dear old Mother Superior asked a few questions and, despite her suspicions, agreed to take her. I could almost see what she was thinking. But she was the kindest of persons and as good as those nuns are. She took Daphne to her and told her quietly that she would take care of her for her Daddy. I made arrangements to pay in advance and asked that Daphne be supplied with anything that might be required, with the bill being forwarded which I would pay at once. With that, I said goodbye and left. Daphne was clutching a little silver-framed photo of me which I had given her.

With a heavy heart I rushed back to Cape Town. From then on, I wrote little letters to be read to her. I sent pocket money. On her birthday I would send small presents. This went on for some time. I began to get little drawings and little letters from her, Daphne's hand being held by someone to help her write. I went to see her from time to time. But it was a very long way to go just to see her for a couple of hours and take her out for a drive. I eventually concluded as time went on that it would not be a good thing to bring this darling little girl down to the Cape into an atmosphere of unpleasantness and disturbance, much as I longed to do so. Besides, she was happy in the Convent and was getting on extremely well. It would be a pity to disturb her. Once I had decided to leave her to continue her education there, I placed an amount of £2,000 in trust for her with a firm in Durban. This was to be used for Daphne if anything happened to me.

When things were looking bright and the business was doing well, I bought a piece of land on the Milnerton coast. I built a little concrete house there. It consisted of a living room, a small bedroom, a tiny kitchen, pantry and storeroom. It had an electric lighting plant of its own. I dug a well from which a good supply of water could be got. We used this so-called shack as a bathing and picnic place. Nesta, Valerie and I spent many happy days there. The nearest other building was miles from it. I liked this rather wild lonely place.

## 8. Married Life – Joan Molteno and me

### The Great Depression

Then came more trouble. A terrible economic depression started.<sup>39</sup> I was losing heavily. I tried to cut down expenses. I opened a branch of the business in Durban. This was to reduce the number of cars I had in Cape Town and to capture the Durban season which was at a different time of year from the Cape. To cut expenditure even more, I even arranged for my mother to go and live in Nancy's little house – which avoided continuing to pay for a nurse and companion. She took over, but not for long. I had to go to Durban for a while to attend to the business there. On my return to Cape Town, I found that she had moved back to her old home, taking Nancy with her. And she had sold the house I had got for Nancy at a considerable loss. There was nothing I could do about it. The money from the sale of the house, however, was a little help. By this time, I had lost £12,000. The Depression lasted three years. Afterwards things became normal again except that I had made a bad mistake. The business had become far too big for me. I had to rush to and fro to Durban and back. I sacked at least three managers for dishonesty. I just could not control things. Even my works foreman, who had been with me for over twelve years, got away with a few thousand pounds before I found out. Things had gone clean mad. Everyone had suffered in the Depression. Old Abe lost £77,000 pounds.

### Divorce from Nesta; Marriage to Joan – Four good friends

It was about this time Nesta and I decided to separate. Valerie was about 17 years old.<sup>40</sup> Nesta went on to marry Harold Crosse-Jones, with whom she was very happy. I soon after married Joan Molteno who was Nesta's first cousin. We too were extremely happy. Nesta and Harold, Joan and I remained the greatest of friends and formed a foursome.



**John with Joan Molteno,  
c. the time they married  
in the late 1930s**

I was now completely worn out by my business troubles. Competition had popped up from all sides. Price cutting had started. I sold out at a tremendous loss, but at least I did get out. The buyers also lost as the whole structure of the car trade had changed. People were now buying their own cars and did not need to hire. My old business lasted the longest but eventually it also went right out.

### Daphne's story continued

A strange thing happened some time before I married Joan and at the time when I was most troubled with my business. I got a letter from my Durban lawyers to say that a woman claimed to be Daphne's mother. She wanted to have Daphne. Allegedly, she had given her baby to a woman who nursed her. At that time she could not afford more children and the woman she had given the baby to was a Mrs Robb. I instructed my lawyers that, if this woman could prove this without any doubt, I would not stand in the way. She did prove it and I had no option but to let Daphne go. After a few

months I went to Johannesburg just to find out if Daphne was happy. Her mother, whom I had of course never seen before, did not leave Daphne alone with me for a moment. The little girl seemed to be happy with her mother, so I left. I felt that I had better now try to forget her as I did not want Daphne to play me off against her mother. I never wrote to her again.



**John's mother, Mrs Jemima Syme, with her daughter, Linda, c. late 1940s**

But many years later, after I had married Joan, I got a telephone call. It was Daphne! I asked her to come and see me and she did. She was still calling me Daddy and I had to ask her to rather call me Uncle John, which she did. She now told me what had happened since the last time she had seen me. It seems that, after the mother claimed her, she instructed her lawyers to claim the £2,000 pounds which I had put in trust for Daphne and which I had eventually withdrawn. The lawyers informed her that the money was in trust and could not be handed over. The woman's disappointment vented itself on little Daphne. Her mother told her that I had done her out of £2,000, that she was a financial liability and that she would have to work and pay the woman this money plus her keep. Daphne was made most unhappy. So eventually she decided to run away.

She had wanted to come to me, but did not want to involve me in difficulties with her mother. Besides she didn't have enough money for the long journey to Cape Town. She decided instead to go to Howick where a girlfriend had gone and was working in the Howick rubber factory. Her mother, thinking her daughter had no cash, assumed she would return home soon. But Daphne had done what her Daddy had told

her time and time again – save some money, hide it, take it with you wherever you go, and never spend it until you really need it. Just in case. Daphne got to Howick with her 'just in case' money and got a job there. She was a clever girl and after a couple of years worked her way quite high up in the Rubber Company. She softened a bit towards her mother and wrote to her. By this time, of course, her mother had no hold over her. She had also remarried. She begged Daphne to come home but she would not. Eventually the mother asked her to go with her and her husband to Cape Town and start a new life there. Daphne was now at the top of her tree and earning a high salary. But the idea of going to Cape Town with her mother and step father, and being able to be near her Daddy and see him, appealed. So she accepted and came down with them.

**Tying up the loose ends**

I should say something about what happened to my sister. Linda married Arthur Sichel. They had two children, Donald and Rosemary. Arthur was a very likable man and very clever with figures. But he left Linda and went to live in Johannesburg where he died quite soon after. Linda was left with two young children. She was not trained in any profession. But she got busy and found a way of earning a living to support herself and her children. I admired her for her hard work. She educated the children and gave them a profession. They both became doctors. Donald eventually married and had two children, but died in middle age. Rosemary reached the top of her profession and supported her mother for a number of years. She has since married and lives in England.

Ian, Glanville's son, had gone to England with his mother when she fled the situation caused by Glanville's mother. After finishing his education, he worked in various fields and eventually settled in Canada. After much tough going, he has been a success in business. I am very proud of Ian. He has married. He and his wife Norma have four children – Philippa, Roddick, Hilary and John. John is my namesake.

### **I buy a horse by mistake**

There is an incident I would like to record. It happened while I was still in business in Cape Town and very busy. I had parked my car on the Grand Parade in the heart of Cape Town. I was crossing the Parade when I saw an auction going on. They were trying to sell a horse. As I was passing I noticed the horse was limping and seemed in pain as they trying to make it trot. It clearly had a sore leg. No one would open the bidding. So I thought to make a stupidly low bid just to stop the horse being made to trot again. I bid 5/- and the auctioneer knocked it down to me! The boy holding the horse came up and said: "Here, Master, your horse". I didn't want the damned horse. I had all sorts of appointments and was in a hurry. And here I was holding a darned horse. There seemed only one thing to do. I got the boy to hold it while I fetched my car. I then tied the lead to the bumper and started towing the horse off. Things seemed to be going OK except that everyone around began to roar with laughter. At length I and the horse got to Adderley Street.<sup>41</sup> His pace was even slower than a slow walking pace. So even running the car in low gear meant slipping the clutch a bit. In Adderley Street we seemed to hold up all the traffic. Hooters were blowing all around me. People came across the street to have a look, laughing and making remarks like "why not load the horse up?" My car was a two-seater Chrysler Imperial with a Dickey seat. As I was passing a policeman on point duty, he said something about having the horse at the wrong end of the car, or some such stupid remark. By this time I would have liked to duck down under the dashboard and stay there!

I eventually reached the sea front at the bottom of Adderley Street. Here there were fewer people and I thought to give myself, the horse and my poor engine (the water in the radiator was now boiling) a longish rest. This really had been a case of hours per mile and not miles per hour! I started off again and after a large number of stops and many hours arrived at our shack in Milnerton. After giving the horse a bucket of water, I had another look at its leg. It was fairly bad now. I went to a chemist. But he said he knew nothing about horses and sent me to a vet. The vet was too busy to come out to Milnerton, but told me what to do and gave me a jar filled with what looked like axle grease. I went back, washed the sore and applied the stuff. Then I had to go to a forage store and buy hay, mielies, oats and the rest. I made a sort of bed for the horse in the wooden garage. Every day I went out, fixed the horse up, gave it some sugar lumps, and the sore began to heal. In the end it was in fine condition. It would kick up the turf and race about when he saw the car coming. In fact, I got scared of his flying heels. What's more, he

would push me, so-called nudging. He would even try to get into the house except the door was too narrow. Eventually I gave him to a nearby farmer who said afterward it was one of the nicest horses he had. As for me, I never wanted to see another horse again. And it took years for my business friends to stop joking about my having only one horse power car, and that at the back instead of the front.

The Second World War started. Valerie joined the army. She drove huge trucks and the rest, and was away a long time. When she returned after the War, she met the man whom she married, George Doudney. They have two wonderful girls and all are as happy as could ever be.

### **Joan and I build a house on Milnerton Beach**

After Joan and I married, we went to live at the shack in Milnerton. Here we planned and built a proper new house. Building it was more a rest cure than work. I was run down. I had got out of business. But, being an active man, I needed to do something. We had an old Coloured man, Paul, who had been in my service for some 15 years. The three of us started building. I made the wooden shuttering. Paul broke up stones which we collected from the beach. I bought cement. Sand there was plenty of. Once the walls were up to about window height, Joan started plastering in between doing the cooking. The house took seven and a half months to complete. I worked from dawn til dark, weekends, the lot. I fitted large steel shutters to the steel windows. Joan painted them blue. So we called the house Blue Shutters. It consisted of a large sitting/dining room with a half-round end. Opening from it was a smallish spare room. Down a passage on the right was a good size bathroom, lav. and a box room 5x6 ft. Further down the passage was the kitchen with a pantry. Behind it was a servant's room and lav. opening from the outside. On the left of the passage was a large main bedroom. Next to it was Nancy's bedroom, also with a half round end. The passage opened into a large garage and workshop in which there was an electric lighting plant and hot water cylinder. The house came complete with the high pressure water supply from the well I had installed.



**John and Joan's house built on the beach at Milnerton -- view of in 1965**

When we moved into the new house, Joan and I found that Nancy was not happy living with my mother and Linda. So we took her home with us. This was difficult as the house was far from any school. We decided to put her in Springfield Convent as a boarder for the time being. She came home at weekends and all the holidays. She was a darling little girl and Joan loved her as much as I did. Nancy was just like a daughter to us. As for my mother, she started off against Joan, but soon changed and became very fond of her, as Joan was of her. So everything was well except that we had to be most careful.

At the Milnerton house things were happy and settled. Jocelyn, Joan's younger sister, had married Frank Morris and they came out from England. They stayed with us for a time, Frank helping me to rivet the last of the steel shutters. After building the house, I started again in a small business. Construction of the



new Cape Town docks was well on the way and I noticed that the sea was encroaching the land. I had seen years before what happened in Durban when the breakwater there was extended. The changing of the natural current washed away the whole beach. I decided therefore to sell our house at Milnerton before the road on the sea front was damaged. We sold just in time because a couple of years later the road had completely gone into the sea. I believe my solid old concrete house has since been used as a chicken farm.

### **Two new daughters; a new home**

Joan and I now moved into a rented house in Newlands.<sup>42</sup> This is where our first daughter, Carin, was born. We were wonderfully happy with our new baby. Nancy was brought home and from now on she went to school at the same convent but as a day girl. We then decided to buy a home. We bought Ravensbury in Church Street, Claremont. Here we had our next new baby, Jocelyn. Our family was now complete. We lived most happily. I had a small engineering works nearby. Nesta eventually sold her



**Joan and John with their eldest daughter, Carin, and Nancy, 1942**

home and lived in a small flat in Valerie's house. My mother died at a ripe old age. Some years later when I was about to retire, Joan went up to Johannesburg for a short holiday and died suddenly.<sup>43</sup> The shock to me was very great. I did retire. And now all I live for is the memory of my wife and for my daughters. Nancy had already married from our home. She has two adopted children and lives nearby. Daphne, who had married and

had a baby girl, sadly died soon after. Her husband came to stay with me for a week – he had held a very good position, but had lost his job, having given way to drink. Their baby had to be parked with his married sister.

### **A final reflection**

When reviewing my strange life, I do wonder why I was separated from my family and people for so little reason. And why did I have to lose my first little Nancy? Again, why lose my two pals in such tragic circumstances? If they had lived, I doubt I would ever have gone looking for my parents. But after the loss of my pals, it seemed to me as if a finger pointed. I felt alone, with no ties, and if I could only find my mother, she might have need of me. The urge was strong. But so was the urge to become a doctor.

Yet all my efforts in that direction were destroyed. Why? I was driven to find my home. When I did and had taken my proper place in it, my father then died so soon – leaving me with ties but no handle. My mother then made life so difficult for me. I fell in love with the girl of my choice. I married her and the poor girl was dragged into a world of mad things created by my mother. But we were happy. It was just that the atmosphere in which we were living started to overwhelm us. I could see disaster ahead so clearly. I tried to take Nesta away and start a new life all over again in Durban. But I was driven back to Cape Town – she couldn't be happy away from her people and friends, and it was the last thing I wanted for her not to be happy. So we returned. I still hoped to find some other way. When our baby was born, it seemed perhaps that we could have new hope. But my mother would not let up (she never did). Then Nesta and I separated and she married again and was happy. And I remarried and was also happy. Then my first wife's husband, Harold, dies and a little later my wife, Joan, dies. So there are the two of us each alone. What happens now and why?

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There is a puzzle here. The 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Wimborne (1835-1914) was in fact Ivor Bertie Guest before he was elevated to the peerage. Could it be that the Mr Guest John Syme is referring to was in fact a younger son of Lord Wimborne? It is worth noting that Lord Wimborne was an early devotee of the motor car. On his estate, Canford Manor, in Dorset, he kept a whole 'stud' of early motors. And if John Syme was his greatgrandson, what a delightful coincidence that he also 'fell in love with' the motor car and ran a luxury car hire business in the 1930s. Source: <http://www.rvondeh.dircon.co.uk/vehicles/wimborne.html>

<sup>2</sup> William Syme's estate gave its name to Palmyra Road which runs from the bridge over the suburban railway line in Claremont to this day.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the South African Republic which in the 1890s was still an independent Boer Republic.

<sup>4</sup> This does not sound like a Zulu name. Could it be Mabanda or Mabandla?

<sup>5</sup> John Syme refers to himself as 'the boy' throughout this autobiography until he tracks down his real parents. Once he was able to have his real name restored to him, he never wished people to know the name the Boss and his wife, the Missus, called him by. I have taken the liberty of changing John's usage to the first person.

<sup>6</sup> While Black South Africans working for Afrikaans-speaking employers would have used the word, Baas, most Zulu-speakers worked for English-speaking whites and addressed them in the old days as Boss.

<sup>7</sup> The Boer War broke out in 1899. Several members of the Molteno and Murray families played a prominent part in opposing Britain going to war against the two Dutch Republics. You can read about what happened in other parts of this website.

<sup>8</sup> An *umfaan* was a young African boy employed in South Africa to look after another (usually white) child.

<sup>9</sup> *Nagmaal* was the fairly infrequent celebration of Holy Communion customary in the Dutch Reformed Church when farmers in the surrounding district would trek in for what was both a church service and social occasion. John Syme also refers to the women's white head-dress and the men's traditional footwear.

<sup>10</sup> John must have been about 10 or 11 by this time.

<sup>11</sup> During the Boer War, the British military rounded up Boer women and children from the farms and placed them in concentration camps. This was to try and prevent any food or other support reaching the guerrillas they were fighting. This reference here indicates that some of the camps had still not been closed in the first year or two after the end of the War in 1902.

<sup>12</sup> This is, of course, a couple of years after the end of the Boer War. The British military authorities had long since been forced to respond to the international campaign exposing the appalling conditions that had initially prevailed in the camps and put them on a better footing. Betty Molteno and Caroline Murray were among the most prominent women in the Cape who had helped Emily Hobhouse and others publicise what was going on.

<sup>13</sup> One wonders whether the Boer War was the last war where the British Army officially arranged for prostitutes to service the soldiery!

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<sup>14</sup> Diamonds had first been discovered in 1869 at Hopetown. The main mine was at Kimberley where a diamond 'pipe' was found, and it rapidly came under the control of a single company, de Beers, which organized a monopoly. But for millennia diamonds had also been washed down the Vaal and Orange Rivers, and this prompted a new rush by hopeful prospectors for alluvial diamonds.

<sup>15</sup> John is speaking of a time just before the motor vehicle arrived in Southern Africa.

<sup>16</sup> Brak water was contaminated by salt.

<sup>17</sup> Presumably this was to mark out each man's claim.

<sup>18</sup> It is salutary for us in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century who are used to every kind of gadget, to be reminded of how primitive technology was, and how prevalent hard manual labour, only a hundred years ago or, in my case, about the time my parents were being born. And also to remember the gulf that separated the big mining corporations that existed even in those days and the poverty-stricken existence of ordinary prospectors and diggers. Conditions people in the rich countries associate today with developing countries existed then in North America and Europe as well.

<sup>19</sup> John Syme at this stage in his life – and he was still a teenager – becomes the breadwinner in what, in poor countries today, is called a child-headed household. As I read about his early life, I am constantly moved by his quiet courage, skill and intelligence as he faces the challenges of poverty, hard work and difficult feelings that most of us can barely imagine.

<sup>20</sup> I.e. Hopefully diamond-bearing gravel.

<sup>21</sup> This is a huge sum. In today's values (2012), possibly several million pounds.

<sup>22</sup> John is not a good speller of proper names; it is impossible therefore to be certain which places he is referring to here.

<sup>23</sup> As we have seen from his account of growing up, he had to earn his living from a very young age and received minimal formal schooling

<sup>24</sup> It is not clear what age precisely John was at this time of setting up his first business – probably only in his late teens.

<sup>25</sup> I cannot fully understand the details of how this contraption worked!

<sup>26</sup> A slight puzzle here. John refers to the Standard Bank, and now speaks of the National Bank. Perhaps the manager at the National Bank had known his colleague at the Standard Bank on the other side of the road!

<sup>27</sup> The casual racisms of language a hundred years ago jar on our modern ear. John is merely using the words English-speaking white South Africans employed at the time – 'Jew shop', 'coolies', 'the Taal'.

<sup>28</sup> This makes John 21 or 22 years old at the time of his finding his family.

<sup>29</sup> Conscription was introduced in Britain half way through the First World War. Perhaps Widderson has called up and served on the Western Front.

<sup>30</sup> Claremont House had been bought by Nesta's grandfather, John Charles Molteno, in the early 1860s. He had decided to relocate his family from Beaufort West in the Karoo and make a new home in Cape Town. This was partly for family reasons (his growing number of children needed to be in school), but also because of his growing involvement in the movement to wrest full self-government for the Cape from the British Government.

<sup>31</sup> See elsewhere on this website for lots more information about Claremont House, the Molteno family home for some 60 years.

<sup>32</sup> This is the 1920s and mass car ownership had not yet developed in South Africa even among whites.

<sup>33</sup> This collision in which several prominent Capetonians, including Frank Molteno, were killed occurred in 1926 on the city's hitherto very safe suburban railway which threads its way for 20 miles along the Cape Peninsula. As a result of Frank's untimely death, John and Nesta went to live with Ella Molteno in Claremont House for a couple of years until it was sold in November 1929.

<sup>34</sup> The money for this came from selling Claremont House and what remained of its estate in November 1929 for what sounds like the paltry sum of £1,675. The Great Depression, of course, was just beginning.

<sup>35</sup> This was in 1930. John and Nesta had been married for nine years and their little daughter, Valerie, was about seven or eight years old.



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<sup>36</sup> This child was their son, Ian. When Gladys left Glanville in desperation and returned to England, she took Ian with her.

<sup>37</sup> The precise year of Glanville's death remains unclear. The Great Depression (1929-31) seems not to have kicked in yet. And if Nancy Syme (see below) was indeed his daughter – she was born in 1929 – Glanville probably died in 1929 or 1930. One thing is certain: Nancy's mother was not Gladys. Gladys had left Glanville and was living in England with her son, Ian, by this time.

<sup>38</sup> Amazing to do it so fast. Durban was over 1,000 miles from Cape Town, and almost none of the roads would have been tarred at this time.

<sup>39</sup> It is difficult to overstate the effects of the Great Depression on people's lives all over the world. In South Africa both whites and blacks suffered greatly. Businesses went bust. Farm prices collapsed. Jobs disappeared. Poverty deepened. Many members of the Molteno and related families experienced hard times as a result. John's financial difficulties were typical.

<sup>40</sup> Valerie Syme had been born in 3 August 1921. If she was 17 at the time of her parents' divorce, this makes the date of John and Nesta's separation 1938.

<sup>41</sup> Central Cape Town's main thoroughfare.

<sup>42</sup> This must have been about 1942.

<sup>43</sup> This was in 1960. Joan was only fifty at the time. Her death was a terrible shock to all the family.