

A Place to Put Your Foot Down

By Elsie Locke

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In this extract from 'The Runaway Settlers', Elsie Locke tells of the arrival of the Phipps family in Governors Bay after they have escaped from a drunk and abusive husband and father in Australia. The junior novel is based on the real life of Mary Elizabeth Small and her family, who were early Pakeha settlers in the area.

An hour later there came from John Dyer's cottage a procession of people, everyone of them filled to the brim with food, warmth and friendliness. The light of a storm lantern made queer-looking patches on the trees; and the familiar scent of young blue-gums mingled with the unfamiliar scent of seaweed from the nearby shore.

First went Mr Dyer, leading a pack-bullock with the blanket-rolls strapped to its back. Next came the boys, putting down tired legs one after the other, stiffly, like toy soldiers. Emma was fast asleep in her mother's arms. Last of all came a large collie dog.

'I doubt if you'll find the place in much condition for living, Mrs Phipps,' Mr Dyer had said, 'for it's been long neglected.'

'I'll make a home of it, so long as it's mine to try,' she answered smiling, and thinking of the barracks at Cashmere which were beyond anything she could do. Now they passed beneath some more trees and into a clearing – and there in the moonlight stood white walls, bare and lonely. 'Hurrah!' cried Jack, running forward, but Mr Dyer called him back.

'Wait,' he said. 'There's sure to be rats, and the rats could be fierce. If you're wise, you'll let Ranger go first.'

'Rats!' echoed Archie with a shudder – they were the only animals he had ever hated.

The door opened with a heavy scraping. The collie did not hesitate for a moment. With short barks and loud snufflings he worked rapidly about the shadowy walls, while the family propped one another up, shivering. At last he trotted quietly out. The rats had escaped through a dozen holes, but they had been scared out of their wits.

Everyone crowded inside and the lantern-light played on the fireplace, the boxes scattered around, the two rough bunks, the litter on the floor. The window was only a square hole covered with glazed calico. The place stank of musty wood, rotting potatoes and the recently departed rats. The boys shrank back to the cool, sweet air.

in the doorway – but Mrs Phipps only handed the sleeping Emma to Mr Dyer and seized the manuka broom which leaned against the mantelpiece.

'All we need for tonight is a patch of clean ground,' she said. 'We won't need rocking to put us to sleep, and tomorrow we can put our backs into it. You won't know it for the same place.'

In one long line, fully dressed, with blankets above and below and folded

under their heads, the Phipps lay down. Comfortingly, the lantern was left on the mantelpiece. 'I can find my way back blindfold,' said Mr Dyer, cheerfully wishing them good night. Emma and Jim slept in the middle of the line. Because of the rats, Mrs Phipps kept a stout stick beside her, alongside the wall; and Jack with his sheath-knife handy was next to the door. But even this fear could not keep them awake for five minutes; and fortunately the collie had done his work well. No rats, but a bar of sunlight woke Jack in the morning. He edged away from the sleeping Archie and stepped outside. Every piece of him ached with stiffness and his shoulder reminded him of its old bruises. He moved out into the centre of the clearing and looked around at its encircling trees, at the Sugarloaf towering above, and at Mount Bradley with its squared-off crags, like the Egyptian Sphinx he had seen in a book; and a joyful thought came surging up inside him.

Father will never find us here!

Mr Dyer had left a water-bottle beside the doorway. Jack took a drink, stretched himself fully awake, and began to explore.

The clearing was almost square, sloping gently to the beginning of the fern, where it was steep. On two sides there was a belt of small trees, and on the verge of what must be the stream that flowed from the Sugarloaf was a mass of flax, tutu and tall toetoe grass with swaying golden plumes.

Jack mounted the slope to get a view of the harbour. It gleamed like glass, except where it was rippled by a dinghy with a single oarsman rocking to and fro. By the time it had passed out of sight, Jack had formed his great ambition.

A boat! I must have a boat!

At that moment an angry grunting and snorting burst from the nearby fern.

Jack swung round. Glowering at him, with short tusks showing under its quivering snout, was a great hairy iron-grey pig. Jack's hand went to his hip, and found nothing; his sheath-knife was still lying on the floor of the cottage. He glared back at the boar – and the boar grunted again and disappeared.

Jack raced back down the slope. In the doorway stood Emma rubbing her eyes; everyone else was still fast asleep. He slipped quietly inside and buckled on his sheath-knife; then he took Emma by the hand and set out to explore in the opposite direction.

In the bush that lined the shore, the bellbirds were singing loudly while two woodpigeons, stuffed fat with fuchsia berries, sat lazily on a branch. A track sloped towards the beach. Emma ran ahead with shouts of joy and danced on the sand.

Shells were piled in ridges just beyond the tide – she picked them up by handfuls and flung them far and wide. When she came to the little stream trickling into the sea, she felt it with her bare toes, gasped 'Ooh!' and splashed on.

'Ooh!' she cried again, in a voice high with excitement. 'Chook! Chook!'

Two brown birds like overgrown chickens stalked out of the bushes to peck around among the dry seaweed. Emma fussed about trying to catch them, but the wekas did not mind in the least, as they were always a few steps ahead.

Jack's eyes turned to the harbour, watching the circles where fish had leaped – they would really be worth the catching! He wondered where the boat had gone.

Then he heard Emma.

'Ooble, ooble, water bubble; ooble, ooble, water bubble,' she sang.

Yes! Water was bubbling, sure enough, right where she was sitting on a green bank above the sand. Jack lifted her down and she stopped singing long enough to say 'Ooh! Cold!' and shake out the wet hem of her dress. She reached out her hands again to catch the 'bubble' – a clear, delicious spring tumbling out into a hollow which someone had smoothed to hold a billy or a pannikin. Sedges reached across the little pool since its makers had left.

'Come Emma – let's tell Mother we've found fresh water!'

'Ooble, ooble, water bubble,' sang Emma all the way up the beach.

They found Mrs Phipps, with her long sandy hair already brushed and twisted into a bun, busy laying an outdoor fire. 'I can't test the chimney until everyone is up,' she said, 'and if they're asleep on the hard ground, it's sleep they need.'

The day was solid work. Water was carried and a tripod built over the fire. Mr Dyer came early with his pack-bullock, bearing all the remaining bundles, an axe and a spade, and a billy of beautiful fresh milk.

'You must come to me if you're short of anything you need,' he said, 'or to the other cottage – I'll show the lad where to find it.'

'I'm Jack,' said the lad promptly.

'I beg your pardon, Jack! I couldn't sort you all out last night. About the next cottage: that's where Mrs Parsons lives. She's my sister. And Charles Parsons shares the farm with me. I don't doubt we'll all be good neighbours.'

'We're much obliged to you, Mr Dyer,' said Mrs Phipps. 'I trust we shall be the same.'

'Can I go with Mr Dyer now?' asked Jack eagerly.

'And no breakfast?'

'I'll soon be back!' he promised.

Mrs Phipps made hot bread-and-milk in the billy, and Jack, true to his word, was home before his sleepy brothers had finished eating.

It was time to examine the hut. There was a partition at one end which had appeared, in the lamplight, to be the end wall. In that tiny bedroom was a second calico window and two more bunks, made of nothing better than forked stakes driven into the ground to support saplings and a nest of small branches. The sacking which covered them was chewed by the rats, and the mesh was broken in many places.

The open fireplace took up all one end of the kitchen, with chains and hooks for the billies and iron bars on which to rest the pans. There was no furniture except for boxes and packing cases. 'All the quicker for cleaning,' said Mrs Phipps. She had everyone running in and out until the hut was quite bare and all the litter swept into the fireplace. Dry twigs were piled on top, the fire was lit, the green leaves were thrown on to the blaze to make plenty of smoke. Mrs Phipps and the boys watched keenly for any wisp of smoke coming out in the wrong places. But no, the high chimney carried it all clear of the thatch.

Small though it was, the hut was completely sound. The rat-holes along the earthen floor had to be stopped up with stones. As for the roof, a few patches of thatch needed renewing, and this had to be done with tussock which was not

handy to find; so Jack and Bill, who had thought they were free of flax-cutting, were sent again to the gully to fetch flax and toetoe for temporary repairs. Archie and Mrs Phipps took out the axe and cut a pile of strong, supple branches to mend the bunks. There was no sacking to be found, but in the gully there was a mass of vine – pohuehue – with dry, springy stalks, which was as good as a wire mattress. The blankets were aired and shaken and laid neatly on top. Now the boxes were soused in the tide to cleanse them of insects, and dried out in the sunshine before being arranged for table and chairs and shelves. Jack sat cross-legged on the ground plaiting one flax rope after another and enjoying the work. The ropes were slung across and along the room to carry clothes and other belongings, for there were no cupboards or drawers. Pots and pans, cups and plates, all had to be arranged. ‘A place for everything and everything in its place!’ said Mrs Phipps.

In the midst of it all danced Emma, bent on finding the best place for Bibi, but each time the doll had to make way for something else. So Jack made her a tiny flax hammock and hung it in the corner. ‘Lullabye, bye bye!’ crooned Emma, as she swung the doll in the hammock happily to and fro.

At last Mrs Phipps surveyed the room and could think of only one more thing to be done. She took out her own treasure – the toby-jug that had been a wedding present.

‘Who will find me some flowers? You, Jim?’

‘Me, me!’ cried Emma. She did not know enough words to explain, but she had seen flowers down near the spring. Off she ran with Jim after her. Yes, there was a bush covered with purple-pink spikes – the koromiko. Emma was in such a hurry she would have pulled every flower off short if Jim had not been there to make sure of good long stalks.

‘Why, it’s like a bottlebrush!’ said Mrs Phipps, very pleased. ‘Only there’s no handle coming out at the end.’

She set the toby-jug full of flowers on the window-ledge; and the house became a home.

Elsie Locke, The Runaway Settlers, Hazard Press, Christchurch, 2000, pp. 54–60.