

PRELUDE

Magistrate Roma Mitchell gazed down from her lofty court bench in the Adelaide Central Criminal Court.

Before her stood a tall thin young man with blonde shoulder length scraggy hair. She thought to herself, “How many more of these young delinquents will I need to lock away before we find an effective way of controlling this new generation of rebels?”

She was known as the “Iron Lady” to the crims on remand at Adelaide Gaol, a no-nonsense, tough, hard-faced judge who would have no hesitation in locking up her own mother if she had been declared “guilty” by the court system.

“If you front up before her on sentence day, look out! It will be a ‘lagging’ for sure!” remarked many a convicted felon before their day in court.

In fact, quite the opposite was probably much closer to the truth. To her close friends and family, she expressed only a deep desire to serve the state of South Australia, where she lived, and which she loved.

A passionate disposition for justice, equality, and the rights of the individual directed her destiny toward the path of serving as a magistrate in the criminal courts.

Her commitment to challenge the long established view of women, and their role in society, would evoke many arguments with her peers in the legal profession.

The right for women to be represented in all professions where men had traditionally presided drove her on with a stubborn determination, overcoming criticism and accomplishing her dream to be treated as an equal amongst men.

Some saw her as a quiet achiever, having the tenacity required to accomplish the high goals she set for her life, yet she always had a sense of fair play, unlike some of her associates, who displayed a zeal for power as their only driving force.

This was the year of 1972, and to the offenders awaiting trial, she represented

the system they despised; a person who would willingly deprive them of their freedom, whether they deserved it or not.

She was a force not to be reckoned with.

The young man looked up at this tough expressionless face and knew he was going to be locked away. He was now eighteen years old, and this was the first time he would be charged as an adult offender.

On many occasions previously, from the age of eleven onwards, he had appeared before the juvenile courts, sometimes being released on a good behaviour bond, but many times sentenced to a detention centre for long periods, a punishment which only increased his anger and encouraged his delinquent behaviour.

As the court prosecutor's voice droned on, reading out the criminal history of the defendant, the young man's thoughts drifted back to his early childhood.

As a six year old boy, Paul Noble sat on the back step, patting his pet cat named Lucky - a black long haired 'moggy.'

It was a calm peaceful Sunday morning in the spring of 1960. The tranquillity he enjoyed began to fade as the cars started to arrive at the Congregational Church next door.

He watched the families alight, dressed in their Sunday best, laughing and greeting one another, while their children played 'chasy' around the vehicles.

Young Paul never went to church, although secretly he enjoyed the sound of the hymn tunes as they drifted through the early morning air. It seemed to give him a sense of inner calm.

The Noble family never went to church. It was excluded from the "respectable" gathering next door as it was of the poorer class, 'on a par' with the migrants, who kept to themselves, and were not included in gatherings within this mainly white Anglo-Saxon community.

Paul's father, Leslie Noble, viewed the parishioners with disdain, "I wouldn't go within spitting distance of those do-gooders. They are the biggest bunch of hypocrites I've ever laid my eyes on, angels on Sunday but 'ratbags'

the other six days of the week!” he would bitterly remark to anyone who would listen.

The church next door never offered to ‘lend a hand’ to Mr. Noble as he struggled to raise his family on his own; not that he would have accepted their charity anyway.

Mr Noble, or rather Les, as his mates called him, had kicked his ‘missus’ (Evelyn) out of their home four years previously, fed up with her liaisons with various men in the neighbourhood.

Her reputation for flirtatious behaviour towards the men who walked past the front gate was well known to almost everyone in the district, yet Les chose to close his mind off to it all for years, not wanting to deal with the realization of a failed marriage and the alternative of a life on his own.

To add to his dilemma, his aged mother, who lived in the outback mining town of Broken Hill some five hundred kilometres away, was unable to fend for herself.

Les’s father had died a few years previously, and the rest of the siblings had resettled in other parts of the continent, leaving Les feeling obligated to care for her.

As she would not move away from the town, Les felt it was his duty to temporarily move to Broken Hill and look after his mother until other arrangements could be found for her care. He left his wife and kids at home, promising to be back within three months.

On his arrival back at “The Hill,” he found work as a garbage truck driver with the local council. Some may say it wasn’t the best of jobs, but Les said it was far better than working down the mines where you never saw the light of day, or even risked being buried alive.

He had a family to support, and wanted to be sure he would be around to see his kids grow up.

He reckoned working down the mines narrowed the chances of that, as he had known many a childhood mate who had lost their father due to accidents underground.

Les lived frugally, sending most of his pay packet home, so his wife could maintain a reasonable lifestyle for their family.

Evelyn became quite resentful towards Les for choosing his mother over her, and began to spend most of her weekends at the local hotel, leaving the babysitting to the two eldest daughters.

Ev, as she was known by her friends, eventually met up with a man at the local hotel by the name of Keith, and with whom she spent most of her time. Keith was also married with children, but chose to spend most of his pay packet at the pub with his drunken mates.

Ev became part of the local group of drinkers, and proceeded to spend the hard earned money Les sent to her every week.

The bills continued to build up, and the credit account at the Myer emporium provided Evelyn with a wardrobe full of expensive clothes and jewellery. One would have to admit, she was always immaculately turned out.

She would often take Keith home and party on till all hours of the night, while the children were sent to their bedrooms, and threatened not to come out.

Keith was a cruel man, especially when he was drunk, which he was most of the time. When the children came out of their bedrooms to see what was happening, Keith would take off his belt and 'lay into' them, as they ran screaming back into their rooms, followed by his bellowing threats of more beatings ringing in their ears.

A reprieve came from the children's sufferings when Keith landed employment on Kangaroo Island, a settlement approximately five kilometres off the south coast of South Australia.

Keith had finally left his wife, and saw this new position as a sheep station maintenance person as a good way for improving his lot in life, the only problem being that the position demanded that it be filled by a married couple, as a wife was needed for domestic duties within the homestead.

Keith explained the situation to Evelyn, and convinced her to pretend to be his wife for a short period of time until he settled into the new job.

A minor problem would be leaving her children at home to fend for themselves.

"You only have to make believe you're my wife for about two or three

weeks Ev, then we can pretend to have a fight and you can go back home to your brats.

“Besides you deserve a break away from the kids. Think of it as a holiday. We can have a great time together,” he reassured her.

Evelyn reasoned that Diana was already sixteen years of age, and working part time, so there was some money coming in for food. Gloria was fifteen, and capable of staying home from school to look after the little ones.

After concocting a reasonable story she explained to the two girls, “It’s like this my little darlings, your father has left us to fend for ourselves, and now we are in so much debt that I have to go away for a while and earn some money to pay the bills. Look after things while I’m away and I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

Satisfied that she had justified her absence, she packed a bag and ‘took off’ with Keith for a few weeks adventure.

She didn’t reckon on a surprise visit from her young brother Ronny and his wife who showed up at the house for a visit. Even though Evelyn told the girls to keep it all a secret, Ronny soon discovered the cover up and alerted his parents to the problem.

The kids’ grandfather soon arrived, furious and frustrated at his wayward daughter’s irresponsible behaviour; however he had no way of contacting her, so he phoned their father in Broken Hill and told him of their predicament.

Eventually Les arranged for his nephew Brian and family to care for his mother and then jumped on the next train home.

With support from his in-laws Les looked after his children until his wife came home.

A very vocal argument developed, with accusations and threats which could be heard by the entire street, coming from both sides.

Finally Les had come to the end of his patience, and throwing some of Ev’s clothes into a suitcase, he physically ejected her from the house.

She eventually teamed up with Keith, and moved to Western Australia,

never to return to the home and the family she had abused.

Les was distraught and angry; blaming himself for marrying the first woman he had met at the end of the war.

He was young, naïve, and pretty mixed up after serving for three years in New Guinea fighting the Japs.

Jungle warfare was enough to mess with anybody's head, and it had certainly taken its toll on Les by the time he arrived back in the Land of Oz.

Les was determined to raise the six kids on his own, and so he did.

These were the days when there were no single parent pensions, and no hand outs from any charity. Les was a proud man, and decided to soldier on and accept his fate regardless.

He had six children to care for, three girls and three boys. The two oldest, Diana, aged sixteen, and Gloria aged fifteen, were the product of Evelyn's first marriage.

They hated their mother with a vengeance, and elected to stay with the only family they knew and loved.

Les treated them as his own children, and welcomed them to stay as long as they wished.

Les had four children to Evelyn. Sandra was thirteen years old when her mother left, Gary five, Paul almost three, and Kenny just fifteen months.

Les worked as a labourer at a tyre manufacturer named "Tonkin Tyres." While most of the children were old enough to attend school, the two youngest would accompany Les to his workplace, where, unbeknown to his employer, they would be hidden amongst the stacks of tyres, Paul babysitting his brother, with a bottle of milk to keep him from crying and alerting the boss to their presence.

This went on for only a short period of time before the supervisor heard the baby crying as he walked by. Consequently, Les was summoned to the manager's office and immediately dismissed.

The only alternative for Les was to remove the eldest girl from school to

become the cook and housekeeper, which he did.

Les then managed to find employment at Cronin's metal factory as a spot welder.

Les Noble was a man of medium height and build, with a fair complexion and blue eyes, his ancestry traced back to Cornwall in mother England.

His grandparents arrived in Australia from Cornwall with their seven children in the late 1800's, living and working in the gold mining town of Walhalla in the Gippsland area of Victoria. One of their sons, Thomas, married a Scottish immigrant by the name of Mary Douglas. They produced nine children, Les being the youngest boy.

As the gold 'petered out', his father journeyed to Broken Hill, N.S.W. to find work.

There he found employment as a winder driver. (A steam driven engine which lowered the cage lifts, transporting men and equipment up and down the mine shafts)

As soon as he had found a house to rent, he sent for his family to move to 'The Hill.'

Les grew up in the rough mining township of Broken Hill during the depression years leading up to world war two.

He remembered well those hard years, when as a young boy, he and his brother Edward didn't even own a pair of shoes between them.

At times they were so hungry they would go begging at the doors of the wealthy mine managers' homes for food.

Sometimes they were treated with compassion, at other times with contempt, and told to 'shove off' or they would have the dogs set onto them.

As the war progressed, Les, along with his brothers, volunteered to fight for king and country as many young men were encouraged to do, defending their land from the Japanese invasion.

While serving in New Guinea, he received a shrapnel wound to the ankle, and during his recovery fell ill to the crippling diseases scrub typhus and encephalitis.

He was eventually shipped back to Australia, a very sick man indeed, and was placed in the Repatriation Hospital of South Australia to convalesce.

Les met Evelyn through a friend in Adelaide, and fell madly in love with her. Little did Les know that Ev had already been married, and had two children from that failed relationship.

Evelyn didn't really want a serious relationship at the time. She was only looking for some fun, and a few nights reprieve from the kids and her parents, with whom she was now forced to live. All she really wanted was a carefree soldier, with a regular pay packet to 'paint the town red'.

Evelyn came from a middle class family and was the youngest of five children.

Her father, a retired Sergeant Major from the British Army, treated his youngest daughter as his little princess.

Evelyn could have anything she desired, and the result was that she was 'spoilt rotten' from an early age.

Whatever 'princess' wanted Daddy would give her without question.

It is said love is blind, and Les wanted only to marry and live happily ever after with the woman of his dreams.

Eventually Evelyn became pregnant, and was forced into a marriage she didn't want to be a part of. Her mother demanded that she marry Les, so that she would not bring shame to the family name, so she finally relented to her mother's wishes, and accepted Leslie's proposal of marriage.

Les and Evelyn married in 1947. They moved into a rented duplex in the district of Stepney while waiting for a Housing Trust rental property, which at that time were being built en masse by the government to provide for the needs of returned soldiers and their families.

Eventually they were allocated a house at number forty five Reid Avenue in the new suburb of Hectorville, an eastern district of Adelaide which predominantly housed low income earners.

Les worked hard, giving Ev full reign to buy everything that she needed to make the house her home, whilst he cleared the block, planting lawns and fruit trees, and establishing a garden that blended with the rest of the neighbourhood.

Unfortunately dreams and plans don't always evolve in the way that one

expects, and Les was now facing a bleak future indeed, with the prospect of the breakdown of his marriage.

Les made friends easily, and so found comfort and emotional support through neighbours and work friends during his marriage collapse, but the trauma of dealing with this failure, combined with the torment and lasting psychological effects of jungle warfare haunted his mind, and during the quiet of the night plagued his sleep.

He never really overcame what he had suffered during the war, and at times endured bouts of depression, finding temporary respite at the bottom of a bottle.

Despite this, he never allowed his struggles to infringe upon his responsibilities as a father and provider. He was treated with respect by the neighbours in the street for his enduring commitment to his family.

There were people living close by, like the Perry's who lived two houses down the road, who would offer practical help such as sewing on buttons and mending holes in the children's clothes.

The Medwells and Mrs. Luck who lived across the road were good hard working folk, whose homes Les could visit and enjoy a cup of tea and an occasional beer, escaping life's worries for a few hours.

All these problems were not the worry of a young child sitting on the back step patting his cat.

They certainly were not the concern of the people arriving at church next door; they only looked after their own.

It did matter though to the young man standing in the court dock, waiting for his sentence to be handed down.

Those memories were of times long ago, and despite the hardships they were good times, when life was simple and happiness came easily.

Church and the good Lord seemed far away at this point of his life.

It was time for him to face his punishment and accept his fate no matter what the outcome.

The voice from the hard face of the honourable magistrate awakened Paul from his day dreaming, now fully focused on the moment at hand.