

THE MOON ROCK TREE

At the bell signalling end of lessons, fifteen-year-old Faith Malham raced out of the classroom and up the street to her father's pharmacy. She found George sitting at his office desk, bent over paperwork.

He looked up as his second eldest daughter burst in. 'Steady on girl. Where's the fire?'

'Not fire,' Faith gasped. 'Snow. There's to be an excursion in May to the Snowy Mountains and Mount Kosciuszko. Can I go *pleeease*?' The girl's blue eyes were shining, her square-jawed face aglow.

'Since you put it like that,' her father replied, 'how can I resist? We'll have to ask your mother but I'm sure she'll agree.'

'I hope it won't cost too much. I'll sell lamingtons for the Girl Guides and deliver medicines for you on my bicycle.'

George laughed at her eagerness. 'Stop waving that brochure around and let me read it. You'll need warm clothes, won't you?'

'I'll borrow a pair of brother Jim's trousers. More practical than skirts.'



On departure day Faith was up early to re-check her suitcase before going to the kitchen where her mother Vera was preparing sandwiches for the journey. Faith hugged each of her sisters in farewell, took her mother's arm and led her to the front step where George was waiting next to his pride and joy – a 1930 Buick sedan.

'See you next week,' she called as they drove away.

At the train station Faith joined a noisy throng of students and their parents. Miss Brown, the sports teacher who was to accompany them, tried to maintain order.

'Girls,' she bellowed. 'Say good-bye to your families and line up in pairs.'

Faith gave her father a quick kiss before turning to her friend Norma. 'Come on, let's get good seats.'

In Sydney they had hours to wait for their connection to Cooma. Unable to stay still, the girls fanned out around Central Station, Miss Brown, trailing behind. As the sun sank in the west, they boarded the overnight train south.



The next morning cars were waiting at Cooma Station to convey the group to the Kosciuszko Hotel, fifty miles to the south-west across the Monaro High Plains. Covered in frost-bleached grass dotted with boulders that looked like huge marbles dropped by giants, the countryside was very different to the lush green farmlands of the Hunter Valley. It was much colder too, and the girls' breath made frosty patterns on the car windows.

After Berridale, they passed through Jindabyne on the Snowy River. With fifteen miles to go, the road wound upwards through stands of straggly eucalypts. The higher they went, the more twisted were the trees, some with coral, ochre and olive-green stripes on their trunks.

As the cars crested Rennix Gap, their destination came into view. Modelled after a Swiss Chalet, the timber and stone Hotel Kosciusko sat on an embankment above a small,

partly iced-over lake. Behind, wide ribbons of snow-speckled grass snaked down a thickly wooded hillside.

They were greeted by Tom Shields, their ski instructor. He gave the girls a talk about ski-ing and showed them some skis – long thin wooden planks with turned up tips and a metal bracket in the middle to hold the front of lace-up boots. A leather strip went around the boot to steady the heel. Faith ran her hands along the bevelled side of one ski.

‘I can’t wait to try them,’ she said. ‘Is there any snow near here?’

‘Not yet but after lunch we’ll walk up the hill behind the hotel to see a special landmark.’



At the top of a steep climb, they rested on a huge boulder above which a tree, bent and bowed by the wind, spread its unruly branches.

‘What tree is this?’ Faith asked.

‘It’s a snowgum – *eucalyptus pauciflora* because it produces few flowers,’ Tom Shields replied. ‘In summer they survive heat and fires and in winter withstand the worst blizzards. Sometimes their branches are covered in icicles. It’s a marvellous sight.’

‘I wish I could experience a real winter storm,’ Faith said, leaning against the tree’s smooth trunk.

‘Perhaps one day you will.’ Tom Shields ran his hands over the boulder’s pitted surface. ‘The mountain pioneers called this Moon Rock.’

‘Why?’

‘There’s an old story about the tree and the rock becoming so white in the moonlight that they could be seen for miles around – a beacon for people lost in the mountains. A track known to the Aboriginal people passed this way and led to the valley and safety.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Better be going down. It will be dinnertime soon.’



The next morning after breakfast, the girls donned trousers, warm coats and scarves for the seventeen-mile drive to Mount Kosciuszko. It was very cold and in the morning sunlight, ice crystals sparkled in the air like diamonds. The drivers parked on a strip of gravel below the summit, so the girls had to walk the last quarter mile to the top where an icy wind was blowing. Some complained, but not Faith and Norma. One tall and dark-haired, the other small and blond – they raced to the largest snowdrift and tumbled down it, shrieking with delight.

Miss Brown, guidebook in hand, got as far as, ‘Named after 18th-century Polish patriot Tadeusz Kosciuszko by surveyor Paul Edmund de Strezlecki, this rounded summit at 7,310 feet above sea level, is the highest point in Australia.’ No one was listening, so she surrendered herself to a view over a translucent blue lake with filmy patches of ice floating on its surface. ‘Lake Cootapatamba was formed during the glacial age and is the highest lake on the continent,’ Miss Brown called out before allowing herself a modest slide down a snowdrift.

Standing on the peak, Faith felt on top of the world. To the north, east and south, indigo ridges folded into the distance. To the west, purple escarpments and snow-capped mountains reared into the sky. She raised her arms and breathed deeply of the crisp alpine air.

After a picnic lunch Tom Shields brought out the skis and called for volunteers. Faith, Norma and two fourth-year girls had their hands up first.

Faith strapped on the skis and grasped a long wooden pole in each hand. 'How do I stop?' she called as she set off.

'Point your toes in and push your heels out.'

Faith did as bidden, but ended in a heap on the very edge of the drift.

'That was quite good for a first attempt,' Tom called.

'Can I have another try?'

Not waiting for an answer, Faith unstrapped the skis, hoisted them onto her shoulder and headed up the slope. A strong swimmer accustomed to the changeable waters of lake and ocean, she quickly adapted to the unstable snowy surface. Three or four runs later she was daring cautious turns that ended in flurries of snow.

The afternoon passed quickly and it was soon time to pile into the cars and return to the hotel. After dinner some of the girls wanted to dance but Faith and Norma were happy to head for bed and nurse their bruises.



The next day they visited Devil's Staircase – a 5,500-foot high escarpment consisting of jagged stepped-back rocks, to the west of the hotel. They learned about the unique alpine vegetation at Dainer's Gap and walked the Waterfall Track at Sawpit Creek where crystalline water cascaded down a mossy creek bed. Everything was newly picturesque, but Faith's heart was at the summit, on skis.

The evening meal over, she excused herself saying she wanted an early night. Upstairs she went to the window and pulled back the curtains. To her joy, huge feathery snowflakes were drifting silently onto the hotel's forecourt.

In the morning a thick white mantle covered the ground, enough for Tom Shields to suggest skiing at the Plains of Heaven, about half a mile west of the hotel on the south-eastern slopes of Kerry View Hill. Trudging uphill in deep powder was heavy going, but Faith and Norma persisted. At the top they strapped on the skis and pushed off. Even on the beginner slope, they took many tumbles in the soft deep whiteness. Gaining confidence, they ventured onto the intermediate section and were soon managing to control the skis. Faith looked up the hill at the curving turns she had made, reliving the heady sensation of skimming over the snow with the wind in her hair.

'Well done girls,' Tom Shields said. 'You'd make excellent skiers – racers even.'

'Not much chance of that,' Faith replied. 'We live too far away. But I will come back one day.'

Tom glanced at the sky. 'We have to go. The other girls will be wanting lunch.' Seeing looks of disappointment, he softened. 'We could come back this afternoon for a couple of hours.'

Their broad smiles were reward enough for him to take a group of the more intrepid girls to the ski slopes even though it was his afternoon off.



That night, there was to be a screening of newsreels and a romantic comedy. The girls filed into the ballroom and sat down. Faith lingered in the doorway.

'I don't feel like watching some boring old picture,' she whispered to Norma. 'I'm going for a walk up the hill to see the rock in moonlight.'

'Are you sure? I want to see the film, but I don't like you going alone.'

'I'll be fine,' Faith replied. 'I'll be back before you know it.'

Outside, the moon was partly visible between scudding steely clouds. Faith hesitated but she so badly wanted to see that rock in moonlight that she brushed aside all thoughts of danger. Tying a scarf firmly under her chin she set off in the direction of the hilltop. Almost immediately snow began falling thickly, obliterating not only her footsteps, but also the rocks that marked the path.

Faith trudged on, icy foliage brushing her face at every step. The snow had smoothed out the contours of the land like marzipan icing on her mother's Christmas cakes, making it impossible to get her bearings. In this completely white world, she could no longer see the comforting glow of the hotel lights below. She tried walking down but found herself going uphill. She reached a ridge and peered over the edge, to find a sheer rocky drop on the other side. Recoiling in fright, she sat against the trunk of a fallen tree and drew her legs to her chest, shivering as much from fear as the cold. She had to face the awful prospect of spending the night on the mountain and possibly freezing to death. What had started as adventure was now deadly serious. How she wished she had worn her heavy jacket. How she wished...

Feeling drowsy Faith was tempted to close her eyes and become one with the wintry white world, when there was a lull in the storm. She looked up and through a break in the clouds saw the moon layering a silvery sheen over the Moon Rock tree, about half a mile away. Forgetting cold and fatigue, she headed in that direction. She scrambled up the boulder's icy surface and settled into a welcoming nook between the gnarled roots of the snowgum.

Sometime later, Faith lifted her head thinking she heard voices. No one; just the wind. Then someone called her name. Peering over the rock she saw the flickering lights of lanterns.

'I'm up here, at the Moon Rock tree,' she called.

Two bulky figures appeared out of the gloom.

'Faith Malham, you have given us a terrible shock,' Miss Brown exclaimed. 'However, I am so relieved to see you I will wait until tomorrow to reprimand you for your foolhardiness.'

'Sorry Miss Brown. I wanted to see the Moon Rock tree in moonlight.'

'Looks like you got more than you bargained for,' Tom Shields said grimly. 'Can you walk? We should get off the mountain as quickly as possible. More storms are forecast.'

Faith cast a last glance towards the silvery tree on its shimmering base as they made their way down to the hotel, the light from the lanterns banishing the terrors of the night.

'Bed young lady,' said Miss Brown. 'Enough excitement for today.'

Happy to oblige Faith sank into the safety of her pillow, but sleep would not come. She was still surrounded by blanketing whiteness and the power of the mountains, holding her in its thrall.



It was raining the next morning, no possibility of skiing. They drove to Smigger's Bog ten miles up the road, but in the downpour, no one felt like exploring. After lunch at the hotel, the girls piled into cars for the drive to Cooma station.

As they reached Rennix Gap Faith look back to the hotel and up the slope behind it. The Moon Rock tree was silhouetted against the grey sky. She fancied it was waving good-bye.

'This has been an experience I won't forget,' she said to Norma. 'I will never again take nature for granted.' She leant back and closed her eyes, seeing again the snowflakes on the old tree's branches glistening in the moonlight like the small creamy blossoms that sometimes graced its tips – *eucalyptus pauciflora*.



Three decades later, many changes had taken place, not only in Faith's life (she was now a pharmacist and married with teenage daughters) but also in the mountains. The Kosciusko Hotel burned down in 1951 and in 1959 the servants' quarters became Sponar's Inn, run by Tony and Elizabeth Sponar. Faith and her family were booked in for a winter holiday.

As they drove the winding road from Berridale to old Jindabyne, soon to be flooded under the Snowy Hydro-Electric Scheme, Faith felt a thrill of anticipation. She would like to try ski-ing again but there was something she must do first: visit the snowgum that had saved her life. When she saw the yellow bulk of Sponar's Inn against a snow-covered hillside, she leant forward.

'There it is,' Faith exclaimed.

'What's so special about this place?' her husband Robert asked.

'I had the best holiday of my teenage years here.'

'Now we're a family, I hope it will be just as good,' he replied, turning the car cautiously into the snow-covered carpark.

Leaving her husband and daughters to settle in, Faith headed onto the snowy path behind the chalet. It was hard work wading through the deep drifts. She stopped to catch her breath just below the top of the hill and looked up. There, etched against a brilliant white horizon under an azure sky, was the tree – twisted and tattered, broken limbs bleached by time and weather strewn across the rock.

Faith climbed the last few yards, sat on a silver-grey bole at the base of the tree and leaned her head against its salmon-pink trunk. 'I said I'd come back,' she whispered. Although she had always lived close to the brilliance of the Pacific Ocean and its white-sand beaches, Faith had an unshakeable feeling of coming home.



SOURCE:

N H Green, 'Kosciuszko Trip', *Our Girls: The Journal of the Maitland Girls' High School*, October 1931, p.13.