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# Scratch Pad 4

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### WHATEVER BECAME OF CALON 1?

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Do you remember the Argonauts? Mac and Jimmy and Gina? Or Elizabeth and Joe and Nan? Which Argonauts? Do you remember your ship name and number? Is it really only 1972 since the dream ended?

In 1952 we still had overnight frosts in Oakleigh. We could tramp along the lawn, scattering frost and soaking our shoes. On a clear night we could still look up and see thousands of stars. And we began listening to the ABC's *Children's Session*. We enjoyed the serials, and listened politely to the other sections.

In 1953 I started school and learned to read. I remember one of the great discoveries of my life — the letters 'ing' really mean something when placed together in a word. The English language, it seemed, was illogical but knowable. Another great day, perhaps the greatest of my life, was discovering Peter Piper Books in Regent Place. An entire bookshop full of children's books! Not for the first time, I wished for infinite wealth so I could buy the lot.

Peter Piper Books was a part of the premises of Tim the Toyman. And Tim the Toyman was one of the advertisers on 3DB's *Children's Session*, the other program we listened to. Our two favourite programs were on at the same time. Jean Lawson compered 3DB's *Children's Session*. With few resources, she broadcast for 25 minutes every week day. She was most famous for writing and producing 'The Fakermangees', an infinitely long serial about a group of children whose adventures became so wide-ranging that eventually they travelled backward through time.

At 5.25 p.m. each day we switched over to the ABC's program, missing most of the business section of the Argonauts' Club, whose exact nature remained a mystery for some years. A serial for eight-to-ten year olds was followed by a different talk segment for each day of the week. On Mondays, we heard Tom the Naturalist (natural history); Tuesdays, Phidias (visual arts); Wednesdays, Argus, and later Icarus (on writing and literature); and Thursdays, Mr Melody Man (music). A serial for 'older children' ended each night's program. (My vague memory is that the format on Fridays was quite different, with a readers' contribution section called the Argosy, and a segment in which the 'personalities' were abruptly foolish and funny for ten minutes a week.)

At first the serials impressed me more than any other

aspect of the program. I was lucky because my parents had always read aloud to me, but dramatized serials with sound effects made much better stories. Some time in 1953 I heard a serial called *The Moon Flower* by G. K. Saunders. This was not just an adventure story. The characters in this story took off in a space ship to visit the moon. While in space, they experienced 'free fall'. They explained carefully what free fall was. When they reached the Moon, they explained that its surface had no air. Hence the sense of wonder they felt when they found one tiny flower in a deep cave. And then there was the excitement of their dangerous trip home.

I did not know about a literary genre called 'science fiction'. I just knew that I had to find more of this 'space stuff' based on *real science*. I read all the astronomy sections in Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia*. I was determined to be the first man to set foot on the moon. The *Argus's* children's section informed me that no space ship could possibly reach the moon before the year 2000, when I would be 53, so I gave up that idea.

The members of 'the team', as they called themselves, insisted that their club was for 'children from seven to seventeen'. Too bad that the concept of the teenager was being invented in the 1950s. I joined the Argonauts' Club when I was nine, and drifted out of it when I was about fourteen. This pattern of participation was probably typical. Despite the dropout rate among adolescents, by the early 1950s the Argonauts' Club boasted 150,000 members throughout Australia.

The idea of the Argonauts' Club was not clear to me when I was seven. Who were all these strange characters with un-Australian names? Why were children never called their actual names, but instead given a 'ship name' and number? Why was Mac, the leader of the presenters, also sometimes known as 'Jason'? What were these lists of marks that were read out from time to time? What was a Dragon's Tooth? A Golden Fleece? A Golden Fleece and Bar? And how could I get one?

Occasionally the 'team' explained bits of the puzzle. Every year or so, they would tell the story of Jason, the ship *Argo* and the Argonauts. In the story there were fifty Argonauts, and they voyaged for years, seeking the Golden Fleece. The story did not make much sense. It was, after all, a 'Greek myth'. However, the story of the Argonauts set me

off in search of other Ancient myths, and I discovered lovely tales fascinating for their capriciousness and lack of Biblical browbeating sense of manifest destiny.

The idea of the Argonauts' Club was that each child should participate, but that each should remain anonymous: an early blow against sexism and competitiveness. Each active member of the club built up a record of achievement, but rarely competed against another Argonaut. Each Argonaut joined a 'ship'. Since there could be only 50 'rowers' on the *Argo* itself, the Club raided all Greek mythology and history for names of new 50-member ships. By the time I began listening, they had appropriated a fair number of Roman and Egyptian names as well.

At first I was diffident about contributing. Why would they think anything I did was worthwhile? What was I good at? Not much, I felt. And the presenters of the weekday segments talked about artists and writers and musicians I had never heard of. Who was this Charles Dickens? Sounded pretty boring to me. Why didn't Icarus (in real life John Gunn) ever mention Enid Blyton, my favourite writer? When Phidias (in real life the artist Jeffrey Smart, later more famous for his painting *Cahill Expressway*) talked about other Argonauts' paintings, they did not sound at all the sort of thing I could do. Swirls of paint? Letting yourself go? What about real drawing? What about comic strips (which I was trying to imitate at the time)?

Every year, the members of the *Children's Hour* team visited every Royal Show in the country. They would pre-record weeks of programs, and present a special program for the audience at the show. 'Mac' was just as I had imagined him — round and middle-aged and fatherly. He was the only person left from the Argonauts' Club's first 'team' (Mac, Elizabeth, Joe and Nan). He was presented as a benevolent spirit keeping the mischievous younger people from tearing things apart. 'Chris' seemed more dour than he sounded on the radio. As junior male, he was the butt of the jokes of the two beautiful lady presenters, Gina and Barbara. At the Royal Show, here they were: my personal gods descended. In 1954, I went up to 'Chris' after the special program had finished and gained his autograph. I wish I had kept it. Little did I know that I now had the autograph of Leonard Teale, who later became much more famous.

In the middle 1950s, 'Chris' was replaced by 'Jimmy', the true hero of this tale. 'Jimmy' was already well known as John Ewart, a Sydney actor heard on almost any of the commercial radio serials as well as other ABC programs. Because of his great versatility and clear singing voice, he became the main workhorse of the *Children's Hour*: the Muddle-headed Wombat in the Ruth Park serial of the same name, the naughty boy in Mr Mulligatawny's Academy, the unctuous sidekick of Mac during the Argosy, the silly bloke with the old car that kept breaking down.

None of the female members of the team could ever achieve the same status, because of the strict Public Service rule that a woman must resign upon marriage. It was this rule that in 1950 had cut short the career of Elizabeth Osbourne, one of the architects of the program. Year after year, just as listeners had begun to enjoy the style of any woman Argonaut, she would disappear. (For this reason, the voice of Mouse in *The Muddle-headed Wombat* also changed every year or so.)

In 1971, I had not listened to the ABC's children's program for many years. I knew that in 1969 it had been cut to half an hour, and given the 4.30 p.m. time slot. This had separated it from a large part of its audience, country children who did not reach home from school until five o'clock.

In 1971, I was shocked beyond reason to hear pop music being played on the program. What had happened to all those introductions to the Great Composers? What had happened to the Writers' Program? The Argonauts' Club seemed to have disappeared. Contributors' actual names were being read out. There was only one announcer left: Jimmy. He still sounded cheerful. He still sounded as if everything was normal. I felt like sending him a card of condolence.

Soon after, the program was destroyed over one weekend. Without warning, a slick concoction for teenagers was substituted for the *ABC Children's Session*. Interviewed at the time, John Ewart was justifiably bitter. I wish I had a copy of that interview. He knew how much work had gone into the program since 1939. He knew what it stood for. Unfortunately, the ABC had conducted a survey, finding that more than half of the program's listeners were by then over 40. That was the excuse given by the ABC powers-that-be when withdrawing funds from the program. The real truth is that they were beginning to push the ABC down the long chute that ended up with today's purveyor of mediocrity.

Was I a good little Argonaut? Not really. As happens so often in my life, the Argonauts' ideal was something that has guided my adult life rather than stirred me to great effort when it was needed. I tended to contribute to only two sections of the Club: 'Topic of the Week' and 'Saturday Charade'. From an early age, I found I was better at spouting my opinion on any nominated subject than I was at inventing original fiction. I earned most of my Blue Certificates from 'Topic of the Week'. For 'Saturday Charade' I could often suggest acting scenarios to illustrate each of three syllables that would be acted out. I don't why I was good at this, and I've never followed it up.

By the age of twelve, I had earned my Dragon's Tooth (150 marks), but I became distracted by Stan Rofe's *Platter Parade* before reaching the Golden Fleece (400 marks). The Blue Certificates were the real prizes. When I achieved six (or the equivalent in Double Blues or Purple Certificates) I could write off for a book prize. Imagine any organization today being able to afford book prizes! In this way I obtained Jack London's *White Fang* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, among others.

If I had grown up in the 1940s, I might have stayed with the Argonauts until I was seventeen. Some did. The most famous Argonaut of them all was Golden Fleece and Bar Calon 1. This person kept winning Double Blue and Purple Certificates in every aspect of the Club's activities. When she or he gained the Golden Fleece and Bar, this Argonaut was still a long way short of seventeen, but kept going anyway. The code of anonymity remained absolute.

Whatever became of Calon 1? And the many other Argonauts who surely became famous in later life? Ida Elizabeth Jenkins (formerly Elizabeth Osbourne) lists quite a few of them in her 1982 reminiscence *Good Rowing!* (ABC Books). They include Charles (later Sir Charles) Mackerras. In her book *Out of the Bakelite Box* (ABC Books, 1990), Jacqueline Kent lists some others, including the prominent Sydney musician Winsome Evans — perhaps she was Calon 1.

However, in 1984, when the Council of Adult Education tried to put together a dinner for ex-Argonauts, not enough people applied to make the venture worthwhile.

Perhaps people cannot stand too much nostalgia. Even Elizabeth Osbourne gives an oddly sour impression at the end of her book *Good Rowing!* After providing an admirably clear picture of the origins and development of the Argonauts' Club during the 1940s, she dismisses all those who

came after her, including the people who guided the Club through the highly successful 1950s. These were the years of the *Children's Hour Annuals*, the Commonwealth Children's Literary, Art and Music Awards, and the projects that enabled Argonauts to write and illustrate their own published books. These were *my* years. The ABC showed that great broadcasting is possible when management places its confidence and financial resources in the hands of enthusiastic and capable people. The eventual failure of nerve came from the top, not from the Argonauts themselves.

For me, the Argonauts' Ideal remains not just a piece of nostalgia, but a code to live by. This is the ideal of non-

competitive achievement for the sake of doing something well. This is an ideal that has become heresy in the 1990s world of competition, self-advancement and mediocrity. It's the ideal expressed in the Argonauts' Pledge: 'To stand faithfully by all that is brave and beautiful; To seek adventure, and having discovered aught of wonder, or delight; of merriment or loveliness, to share it freely with my comrades, the Band of Happy Rowers.'

Maybe all we need is a new boat.

— *Dragon's Tooth Thalia* 24, 23 October 1991

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## KILLING THE PERFECT RESTAURANT

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If you ever become the owner of a restaurant in Melbourne, and you serve the greatest food in the city, and you want your enterprise to succeed, don't tell Elaine and me about it. We might get to love the place, and turn up every Tuesday night. You might as well file the bankruptcy papers now.

When Elaine and I got together in 1978, we decided that gobbling down a plate of chops and veg was not the most romantic way to spend a relaxed evening. We had little money, but were willing to try a few promising restaurants. In those days we couldn't find any in Collingwood, so we put off our quest for a while.

Often I went past a little shop front on Johnston Street while walking from our place to Hoddle Street. The sign outside said 'Two Up'. Curtains and a fish tank in the window hid the interior. No menu was visible. It was impossible to tell what kind of a restaurant it was. To judge from its surroundings, it might have been no more than a primitive chop house.

Elaine and I were still looking for *the* place to eat. Or even *a* place to eat. Our favourite Chinese restaurant, King Wah in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, had closed down for two years. One night Elaine and I said to each other, more or less at the same time, 'Let's *try* that place down the road. It might be good.'

Some nights in one's life are merely memorable; others are all-important. That night we walked very tentatively into Two Up. We had made no booking. We did not yet know whether it was the sort of place where one made a booking. We were met by a genial, slight, young man in a cook's apron. He showed us to our seats. The place was a genuine candlelit restaurant. In mid-1978, candlelit restaurants were *passé*. We loved it. The small space, low lights, candles and air-conditioning allowed us to forget manic, noisy, polluted Johnston Street that was burbling away outside.

In 1978 we did not know a lot about food. Elaine was (and is) a good cook, but at that time she had hardly glimpsed the possibilities of international cuisine. During my Carlton bachelorhood I had spent much time in the cheaper Italian restaurants of Lygon Street. In 1975 I had eaten the hottest meal of my life at the old Jamaica Inn, when Monty owned it. With Elaine I had just discovered Chinese cooking. But many culinary possibilities remained untasted, including the whole range of seafood.

At Two Up, items on the menu were written in badly spelt French. The place had pretensions to quality. But why, we

kept asking ourselves, was it located *here*, in a particularly seedy-looking part of Collingwood?

We played safe. We both had onion soup and carpetbag steak. When the food arrived, we became addicts of Two Up restaurant. The soup had a creamy yet complex flavour. There was much in here beside onions, include some ingredients I had never tasted before. Fourteen years later, we've never found soups quite as tasty as Two Up's.

When the carpetbag steak arrived, I realized that I had not known exactly what type of dish that was. It proved to be very rare eye fillet stuffed full of oysters. Me eat oysters? I had never tried them before. A few mouthfuls. Yes, for me. Yes, for Elaine. The strawberry pancakes for dessert were remarkable. We've never since tasted better than *them* either.

For the next year and a half, Two Up was our food education centre. Before we found the place, I was sure I did not like seafood. Two Up turned me into an addict of garlic prawns. Two Up set a standard for cooking steak that we've rarely found again. Before we began visiting Two Up, we did not realize how refined and tasty a *pâté* might be. New additions all.

We remember the first night at Two Up as one of the perfect nights of our lives. Even in 1992, it's often the restaurant we wish we could visit when we feel that itch to go out at night.

But that evening was not quite perfect. The amplified music was dreadful. Soon after we arrived (and we were the only people there, as on many other nights at Two Up), the chef/waiter turned up some particularly loud and obnoxious disco music. After only a few minutes, I begged him to turn it down, which he did. But he never played tapes of music, Mozart perhaps, or Mantovani at worst, that fitted the atmosphere he wanted to create for his restaurant.

Oddnesses kept thrusting themselves to our attention. When we started going to Two Up, the place had a thriving luncheon trade. That disappeared. Soon the place was closed at lunchtime. The quality of the service was variable. The chef/waiter was our favourite. When he was there, he not only provided prompt meals but told a good yarn as well. On the other nights there was a capable waitress who told us she was Rob's sister. But 'Rob' wasn't Rob at all. The restaurant's calling card said that he was 'Alex Doubov'. About the end of 1978 Rob's sister disappeared. Rob was again both chef and waiter. We could hardly help noticing that the restaurant was not doing great business. If we went on

Tuesday night, we were usually the only people there. Conversations with Rob brought florid accounts of the decline in the restaurant trade in general; how too many places were opening all over Melbourne. (That was true enough. That was the height of the Melbourne restaurant boom, when *The Age* was challenging and encouraging diners and traders with its waspish 'Epicure' restaurant critiques.)

We almost parted company with Two Up when another waitress began to work on busy nights. She wasn't very good. Once she offered to keep a bottle of cabernet sauvignon in the fridge until we needed it. But on nights when nobody else was around, and the long conversations went on, we discovered that this was Galinda, Rob's girlfriend. Members of Rob's own family no longer visited the place. Galinda was good at one thing — telling us in graphic detail how badly the restaurant was doing.

Galinda and Rob formed their own private disaster area. Even the fish in the tank kept dying. At first we thought Galinda must be one of those girlfriends who hang like a millstone around the neck of the brilliant beloved. But that presupposed that Rob was something other than his own worst enemy. It turned out that Rob had a violent aversion to Greeks, but was trying to run a restaurant in Collingwood. (He was Latvian.) I don't think he even asked himself why the mediocre Chinese restaurant two doors down did a roaring trade while his customers disappeared. I suspect that he had found ways of alienating the local people who could have kept the place going. He retained a dream of attracting flocks of rich folks from Kew and Doncaster, and for a while people did come long distances to enjoy the food.

We were annoyed by one example of Rob and Galinda's ability to kill the perfect restaurant. It was approaching the time of our wedding (the beginning of March 1979), and we wanted to hold it at Two Up. Elaine's parents were doubtful about the idea, but we knew that anybody who attended would be won over by the quality of the food. Late in January, we walked into the place to find Rob and Galinda looking more than usually distraught. 'We have to close,' they said, and did — at least, for long enough for us to be forced to find another place for the wedding reception. A few weeks later they gained a loan to keep them going for another year.

No matter what they did, things went downhill for them during 1979. We kept telling people about the wondrous food of the place; the quality never declined. Our friends would go along, become annoyed by some idiocy or other, and never go again. Rob had one weird period when he was trying to train a helper — with the result that the main meal would arrive at 11 p.m. and dessert at 1 a.m. This actually happened on two occasions I know of. Some friends of ours were not amused by the experience.

The inevitable came in January 1980. Two Up did not re-open after the Christmas break. We tried to find out where Rob and Galinda were moving to, but they did not tell us. Despite the fact that the disorganization of their lives annoyed us at the time, we miss that restaurant still. We have never found a place that matches it for quality of food. We have never found another place where the décor and atmosphere so suit our hide-away-from-it-all temperaments. There were nights when Elaine and I were left to stare at each other or at the fish in the tank: quite enjoyable, provided the wine was good; we could forget everything that was difficult in our lives and concentrate on each other and the sips and munches.

We might have regarded the disappearance of Two Up as

merely a bit of very bad luck if we had not started making a habit of it. Wiping out restaurants, that is.

Mermaid was a very good seafood restaurant in Smith Street, Collingwood. Its specialty was a dessert called hot cheese cake, a cold icecream-covered cheese cake taken out of the refrigerator and placed in the oven for a few minutes. One could skimp on the rest of the meal in order to get to dessert. The atmosphere was relaxing, despite the size of the place. (I've found out only recently that it was renovated out of the shell of the original Cole's Store in Smith Street.) The skilful use of carpet and split levels removed the echoes from the giant open area so that the restaurant was nearly as quiet as Two Up.

The only waiter at Mermaid was an affable Greek. We were puzzled one night when two characters stalked into the restaurant and thudded out to the kitchen. They did not look as if they were there for a nice night's feed. Eventually they stalked out again. There had been much rapid talking and gesticulation from the back, and no food had arrived at all. When the waiter finally brought the next course, he did not look too happy.

We did not say anything at the time, but Elaine and I both had the same thought — how long before the Mermaid burned down? At that time, fires were happening regularly in Collingwood. Big furniture stores. Small stores in blocks that developers wanted to turn into a supermarket. Insurance fires? A protection racket? Or was there a gambling-debt recovery scheme being conducted along Smith Street? That waiter looked as if he had been leant on.

Mermaid did burn down eventually. Not for some time after, and not before a temporary change of name. One morning, as Elaine was going past in the tram, she saw the blackened wreck. And the news of the fire was not even on the radio news or in the paper.

At about this time, our friends stopped recommending their favourite restaurants to us. Our seeming vendetta went on. El Cid, a wonderful Spanish-food restaurant in Johnston Street, closed down in 1980. It had been praised in *The Age* and *The Melbourne Times*. It was full of people on the last night we went there. But it failed to reopen after the 1980/81 Christmas break.

Want to buy a pizza in Collingwood? Every time we have discovered a great pizza place within walking distance, it has closed down.

Our most heartbreaking loss was Enri's; our most surprising destruction was Two Faces. In their different price ranges, both were popular in the early 1980s.

We only went to Two Faces once — during the only time in our married lives when we felt rich. The waiter was snooty, the portions minuscule and unremarkable in quality, and the price \$100 for four (1979's equivalent of today's \$400 or more). The only highlight of the evening was the wine list; we shared three delicious and otherwise unobtainable wines. Two Faces was overrated, we decided, but the fact that we enjoyed the evening seemed to condemn the place. The owners relocated to the Mornington Peninsula.

Enri's was run by Enri as if he were an MC at a comedy café. Enri is a German who arrived in Australia after many years living in Argentina. He served what he called 'Argentinian food'. Surely no Argentinian ever slept in garlic. The perfectly cooked steak arrived on a bed of garlic. Grilled fish was covered with garlic top and bottom, then stuffed with it as well. Nobody minded except your work-mates next day. Garlic and perfect food inspired much drinking of big Victorian red wines. When Enri himself was drunk enough, he came out armed with a soda siphon which

he called his 'choo choo'. This was filled with an unholy mixture of liqueurs. Nobody could avoid having this squeezed down her or his throat. We left late in the night feel much too merry.

It was all too much for Enri. He sold the restaurant to people who kept up its traditions, but they could not fake the atmosphere or the food. A few years ago, Enri had a brief fling at another restaurant, but this lasted only a few months. Perhaps if we hadn't discovered his second restaurant, it might have lasted.

How potent is the Gillespie/Cochrane Curse? As you can guess, it must have abated, or there wouldn't be a restaurant left open throughout Melbourne. Many of our 1982 favourite restaurants stayed open and prosperous throughout the 1980s. We found we had to book tables at them

instead of checking whether or not they were still open. We could praise restaurants to our friends without anticipating the shadow of the wrecker's ball. During the last year, the dreaded Recession has been doing far more harm to restaurateurs than we ever could have done.

But never again did we discover the Perfect Restaurant. Two Up was it, and our nights there were our happiest. Not only did we discover perfectly cooked foods we've never tasted since, but in those days we could buy a 1974 St Hubert's Shiraz at \$2.95 a bottle or a 1972 Brown Brothers' Shiraz Mondeuse Cabernet for \$5 a bottle. We drank them all, instead of keeping them, and happy hazy memories are all that remain.

— January 1992