

THE COMMON RAT

P. D. HEPWORTH, ARCHITECT

I wished, long ago, to be P.D. Hepworth, Architect.

My father cleaned out the roof gutters once a year. He went up the ladder at the end of autumn so that the gutters and spoutings could flow freely in the winter. He wore gloves and he scooped out handfuls of dirt and decaying leaves and threw them down onto the ground. The people next door didn't clean out their gutters at all and so the gutters were choked up with leaves and soil. In some places weeds sprouted round the edges of the roof. With heavy rain the gutters quickly overflowed; water cascaded onto the garden where it washed the soil away.

The people next door were the Bonneys. They rented the house. My mother managed to convey to us that the Bonneys were inferior to us—unruly, rowdy, careless, transient and inferior. One day they would go away, go back where they belonged. Mrs Bonney, my mother said, had been married before. Divorce was not something you got in our street. Mrs Bonney wore high-heeled slippers when she went into the back garden to hang out the washing. Generally people in our street were decent and they mowed the lawns and clipped the hedges and minded their own business. Part of that business was keeping the gutters free of leaves. The Bonney's couldn't care less; they had holes in the wire door and the house was full of flies. I expected bad things would happen to the Bonneys—Mr Bonney would die in an accident at the newspaper where he worked; the children would come bottom of the class; Mrs Bonney would have varicose veins and too many babies. Some of these things came true, and one of the girls got TB, but

mostly the Bonneys prospered. The eldest boy got a Rhodes scholarship and went to Oxford, and once Mr Bonney won a new car in a raffle.

I was friends with Patricia Bonney, who was my age. We both had swap cards and we also collected love comics. My love comics were a secret at home, but Patricia shared hers with her sisters—and her mother read them too. I felt uncomfortable about Mrs Bonney reading the same stories as me. Patricia and I spent many afternoons on Patricia's bed reading comics. We also read *Reader's Digest* and *National Geographic*. Patricia said the *National Geographics* were full of stories invented by people with vivid imaginations, and these stories were illustrated with trick photography. Her father, she said, was a trick photographer who sold pictures to *National Geographic*. It was in one of the *National Geographics* I saw pictures of houses with flowers growing on the roofs.

People in Nebraska build houses from bricks they cut from the sod. The grasses on the surface of the earth create a solid pelt with an intricate web of roots. It is possible to cut chunks from the earth and build houses with the chunks which contain the seeds of flowering plants. The wide flat slabs, used for making the roof, bloom in the spring with flowers. Patricia said it was obvious the photographs were fakes. I hoped they were real; I liked the idea of flowers blooming on the roof. Whole streets of houses with gardens like bouquets and hats. Patricia said what about earthworms dropping through the ceiling. And do you want snails and centipedes crawling all over the roof all the time.

The houses in the photographs were very simple, and, apart from the flowers on the roof in springtime, they were ugly and uninviting. My own dream houses were the ones in coloured diagrams in a book about how to build houses. The best one of these was labelled; Bungalow at Esher, Surrey'. It had a thatched roof and dozens of small window-panes, like a house in a fairy story. Roses grew around the door. I had never seen such a house in Australia, and I was very interested in the fact that the picture was accompanied by the architect's working plans. This meant the house was not a fantasy. In small print along the bottom of the page it said: 'From plans and drawings specially prepared by P.D. Hepworth, Architect.

I wanted to go further than P.D. Hepworth; I wanted to have flowers growing wild on the thatch. I got an exercise book with blank pages. I got coloured pencils and a ruler, a pen and Indian ink. On the cover of the book I wrote: 'P.D. Hepworth, College of Architecture, Nebraska. Plans and drawings specially prepared.' I worked in private alone in my bedroom. Like my love comics, the book was a secret. I didn't tell Patricia. In the book I drew

architectural pictures of houses with flowers blooming on the roof. All kinds of houses as time went on. I signed each drawing 'P.D. Hepworth, Architect'.

When I left home to go to college I left behind such childish treasures as P.D. Hepworth's book of houses. I never lived at home again. Years later when I searched for the book I couldn't find it. I wish I had it now because the woman in the apartment next to mine spends a lot of her time imagining the designs of houses. I'd like to show her the book, but really I would like to be able to look at it and let it take me back to Patricia and the love comics and the trick photography.

The woman next door is Jean. She suffers from depression, claustrophobia, agoraphobia and ringing in the ears. She is also mildly anaemic and lives, it seems to me, on tea and cigarettes. She seldom leaves her apartment, and she spends her time watching television and reading newspapers and dreaming. One of her dreams is the dream of living in a beautiful house of her own. To nourish this dream Jean studies the housing section of the newspapers and imagines the houses she could buy and live in and how she would feel. When I told her about my phase as P.D. Hepworth, Architect, it made her smile. Jean doesn't often smile. Sometimes she asks me if I have found the book yet. I never will.

Jean tells me she has been almost cured of ringing in the ears.

'If you are low in manganese - or that might be magnesium - you can easily get noises in the head. I had this. I used to call it ringing in the spheres because the sounds you get could be coming from somewhere in outer space. I was so tired all the time. So exhausted I couldn't lift a duster, let alone peel a potato. Too weak and distracted with the noises in my head to light a cigarette or start an argument. Things needed doing round the house. I was married to Doug and things needed doing. never mind growing flowers all over the roof.' She smiled again when she said that. 'The walls wanted painting; buy a new lounge suite; mend the door in the laundry; get the wiring done. But the less manganese I got, the louder the noises, and I just couldn't think, couldn't manage to do a thing. Then I went to the Chinese doctor—herbalist if you like—and now I always have the drops and the tablets and my head's as clear as crystal. Not a sound. I'm almost cured of it. But if I let myself get low in manganese I can hear the noises coming back like some great big invisible mosquito zooming and circling and drifting in my head. Doug couldn't stand the drama of it. We split up.'

I told Jean about me and Jack. When we split up I came to live here in the apartment. This is no dream house. It's a million miles from the Bungalow at Esher, Surrey. it is cold and lonely and dark and ugly and the landlord

won't fix the tap. I don't suffer from any of the things Jean suffers from; I could leave. I don't. Where would I go. Nobody cleans out the gutters here. If I liked I could scatter packets of seed in the silt along the edges of the roof. I could grow blue and purple and scarlet and yellow flowers, like eyebrows. I could climb onto the roof and lie there reading love comics.

Sometimes I dream that I am living in the house where I grew up. Not long ago: I'm living in the house with my young son and another woman and her baby. it si night. A man wearing glasses and a green felt hat comes scratching at the back door. I bolt the door against him, but I forget the front door is wide open. he comes in, hides behind the door of the big bedroom where my parents sleep. I know he's there. With the other woman and the children I run from the house leaving the man behind. I have the comfort of the woman and the children, but I can never go back to the house.

I wished long ago to be P.D. Hepworth, Architect. There were times when I almost was. And times, just a few rare, sweet times when, lost in an ecstasy of inspiration and belief, I was P.D. Hepworth. I imagine and I remember the drawings I did.

I drew also in a book called *The Book of Families*.

*One summer there was an eclipse of the sun and my father said I could look at it through some smoky glass. We were standing on the brick path in the back garden and my father explained to me that it was very special to be able to look at the eclipse. The glass was precious. I dropped it and it shattered on the bricks. I don't remember what my father did, or what he said to me, but I know I went inside the house at once. I went into my bedroom and I took out P.D. Hepworth's book and another book. In the second book I drew the families that would go into the houses. Different kinds of families, but nearly all huge and complex with grandparents and great-grandparents and many aunts and uncles and cousins. Everyone had interesting names. One of the surnames was von de Kaponpah. Some families were distinguished by multiple births or physical peculiarities. A few of the families were related to other families. I kept notes on the children's health and development and school results. They all had hobbies and pastimes and favourite colours and songs. They had birthdays and lucky numbers. I designed dresses for the girls. One of the families was Dutch and they started a tulip farm.*

*I grew tulips, the petals shiny like satin, the centres black and powerful. I pressed the petals in a heavy book, crushing the juicy colours up against the Great Wall of China. The heavy book belonged to my father; I still have my father's books.*

*The Book of Families* is gone. I turn over in my mind the image of my feverish self as I sketched and labelled the people who lived in houses beneath roofs of flowers.

There were details of the colours of the rooms; the sorts of carpets, curtains, furniture. I designed the gardens, taking suggestions from one of my father's books. I marked the book with indelible pencil and the purple marks are still there: 'Suggestions for planting a kitchen garden measuring 148ft by 96ft, showing rotation of crops in three plots'. One family grew 'strawberries and two rows of rhubarb and early peas followed by autumn cauliflower'. People called the Roses grew all kinds of roses troubled by leaf lice that would 'suck the sap, blocking the functions with a substance known as honeydew'.

I spent hours alone in my room inventing houses and people and lives and problems, right down to diseases and insect pests. I saw less and less of Patricia. A girl from one of my families presented a bouquet of white lilies to the Queen. Another girl accidentally ate seeds from a laburnum and she died in agony. Patricia and I drifted far apart.

I lost the photograph her father took of us together, me and Patricia by the hole in the front fence, the gaps between our teeth mirrored by the spaces where the palings were missing.

The last big thing I remember properly about the Bonneys was when some of the tiles on their roof blew off in a storm and the rain poured in on Mrs Bonney in the bath.

I can tell these things to Jean when she is feeling down, and sometimes she smiles, sometimes she stares at me in puzzled way, sad. 'You must find the P.D. Hepworth book for architects.' I tell her it's gone forever, and *The Book of Families* too. Jean says did P.D. Hepworth have a house and family, but I say I never got round to that.