

## GARDNER TREE

by "Dombakup"

The music coming from the radio was as familiar as it was evocative: the lovely gentle lines and swelling rhythms of Bach's Goldberg Variations. It took me back, as it always does, to one of the more memorable episodes of my youth, my time as fire lookoutman on Gardner Tree .....

It is evening, somewhere in the karri forest west of Pemberton. A young man sits drinking a mug of coffee on the step of a tiny hut. Behind and above him swings a hissing Tilley lamp, and the soft night air is unexpectedly full of the sounds of a harpsichord. The music comes from the horn of an ancient wind-up gramophone which stands on a small wooden stool in the centre of the hut. The gramophone, together with a slim stack of scratchy 78's, was a gift from friends of the family where it had been superceded by a more modern appliance. It provides a civilizing influence in this lonely bush scene, and is the young man's pride and joy.

It is a very good hut. Only 12 feet by 10, but securely clad in thick karri weather boards and fully lined with brightly varnished and heavily knotted pine. At one end a Metters No. 1 stove is set into a bricked chimney, and is hung about with blackened saucepans, a billy and an enormous frying pan. At the other end a small louvred window looks out onto a wall of green karri scrub. Near the window is an antique Erikson telephone, complete with bells, a crank and detachable earpiece. Beneath the 'phone a yellowed card is tacked to the wall, and on it are typed the various code rings for contacting headquarters and the other towers on the line. An iron-framed bed with prickly horsehair mattress and grey Government-issue blankets occupies one side. Opposite, and within arm's reach, stands a deal table and a Coolgardie safe. A fruitcase has been nailed to this wall above the table, and on its crude shelving stand the dietary staples: packets of tea, sugar and salt, a tin of condensed milk, vegemite, tomato sauce. It is a very satisfactory hut.

Outside the door stands the TREE. The massive butt measures 25 feet in circumference and the whole thing is nearly 200 feet in height. But it is more than just a great karri. It is a tree long since destined to become interwoven with the affairs of man. This tree had been specially sought and then chosen from a myriad of others in the forest. Its heights had been scaled, the mightily crown lopped off and a tiny cabin bolted into the topmost forks. A ladderway had been pegged into the bole, linking its lofty eminence with the prosaic world below. Telephone wires had been strung, cement poured into holes, a towerman's quarters constructed at its foot. In its conversion to a lookout tower the tree had suffered many indignities - and yet somehow it had never been really conquered.

At least this is what the young man feels as he sets out each morning to climb to the top and carry out his appointed duties as "watchman of the forest".

He carries a small haversack over one shoulder. This contains provisions for the day: bread and vegemite, cold sausages hoarded from the previous evening's meal, dried fruit, a bottle of cold tea. At the foot of the ladder he pauses and glances up, and there is a moment of almost palpable stiffening of the mental sinews. Then the climb begins, a measured steady hand over hand, up and around the spiral, a wooden peg and metal spike alternatively clasped and released. The first 100 feet or so is easy going. The leafy regrowth along the stem provides shade and shelter, and the massive trunk always at his left

is a constant source of strength and security. There is time to look about, to take in a scene of infinite variety and scale, from the ever-changing perspectives of the surrounding forest to the minutiae of insect life on the bark of the stem. But a point is suddenly reached beyond which the tree is dead, and here a step or two takes him from the green and familiar world of the forest out into the empty bowl of the sky. It is now no longer a tree, but a puny grey spar jutting up into the void, knobbly with old severed limbs, festooned with wire and pegs, and surmounted by a preposterous little cabin, eerily silent and uninviting. Here the climbing becomes difficult. Awkward bumps and limb stubs must be negotiated, the metal spikes dip alarmingly as they take the weight and the wooden pegs in the dead wood are loose and treacherous.

Closing his mind to all the possibilities, the young man steadily works his way up, finally to heave himself through the trapdoor, slam shut the lid and know that he has made it again, and is safe. It may be false security, he reflects, but its better than none.

The lookout cabin is six feet square, half timbered below and with sliding glass windows on the four sides. It contains the usual paraphernalia of the fire lookout: map table, direction finder, log book, scale rule, pencils, wind gauge. The latter is unsophisticated - a short length of binder twine suspended from a rafter. He has been taught to gauge the strength of the wind by its deviation from the vertical.

It is 8 a.m. and the daily routine commences. He rigs the direction finder and checks it against the Pemberton mill smoke off to the northeast and Silver Mount to the west. Telephone contact is made with the outside world, and he records the forecast and greets the other towermen. He has spent many hours chatting on his 'phone with the four other towermen on his network, but has never met them.

Beyond the cabin windows extends the vision splendid of the southern karri country. To the south lies the coast, and the great glittering masses of the Yeagarup and Meerup Dunes, but on the other three sides the karri forest sweeps away, from the sharply focussed plumage in the foreground to the distant grey-green haze of the summer day. Immediately below the tree, and in odd patches here and there, are occasional glimpses of semi-cleared paddocks of old Group Settlement blocks, the brown pastures thickly dotted with huge ringbarked stags.

It is cool in the cabin, and there is very little for the young man to do. He scans the forest, almost hopefully, for something of importance to report. He write a letter, reads fitfully, chats with the other towermen. Each hour he makes a brief report on his visibility and the wind strength and direction, a welcome burst of activity to mark off the crawling passage of the day.

He sees no smoke all day. It had been different earlier in the summer he remembers, before the burning season closed, especially when the cattlemen had been lighting up their leases down along the coast. Then the towermen had been very busy, and it had been a time of constant serious discussion and peering through the binoculars as the various smokes were sighted, described and reported, and of constant interrogation from the harrassed foresters at headquarters. On one occasion, following a dry thunderstorm, they had all been required to stay up the trees well into the night, plotting lightning strikes from their glow.

But today, it is a relief from boredom, not anxiety when finally at 6 p.m. the Duty Officer at headquarters gives the O.K. to go down. The log book is ruled off and signed, the map covered and the instruments packed away. Looking down through the trap, the leafy boughs below seem like welcoming arms, and he hastens to their embrace. When the solid earth is finally reached, it feels very good. He turns his back on the tree and heads for the hut, thinking about getting the stove alight and cooking tea. Above, the tree still seems to be watching out, its glassy eyes catching the last of the evening sun, remote, impassive, unconquerable .....

It was only 20 years ago, but it seems like a lifetime to the days when I was a towerman on Gardner Tree. There is no Gardner towerman today, nor, for that matter are any of the old tree towers of the karri country still in use. Technology has caught up with fire spotting and the job is now done from light aircraft.

Gardner was condemned in 1971, and the bottom section of ladder taken away. No-one can make that incredible ascent and descent again. The hut at the bottom is gone and the small clearing is slowly filling up with waterbush and karri wattle. But the tree itself still stands, and the tiny cabin at the top, slightly the worse for wear and lack of maintenance, seems, as ever, to mock the puny observer on the ground. I called in there the other day, on the way home from somewhere, and wandered briefly about, gazing up with that familiar feeling of awe and respect. The last rays of daylight were illuminating the dreaded top. And as the gloom gathered in the surrounding forest, I thought I could almost hear the notes of a harpischord .....