FIG JAM AND FOXTROT

Tales of life, love and food in the Karoo

a cookbook with a difference by

LYNN BEDFORD HALL

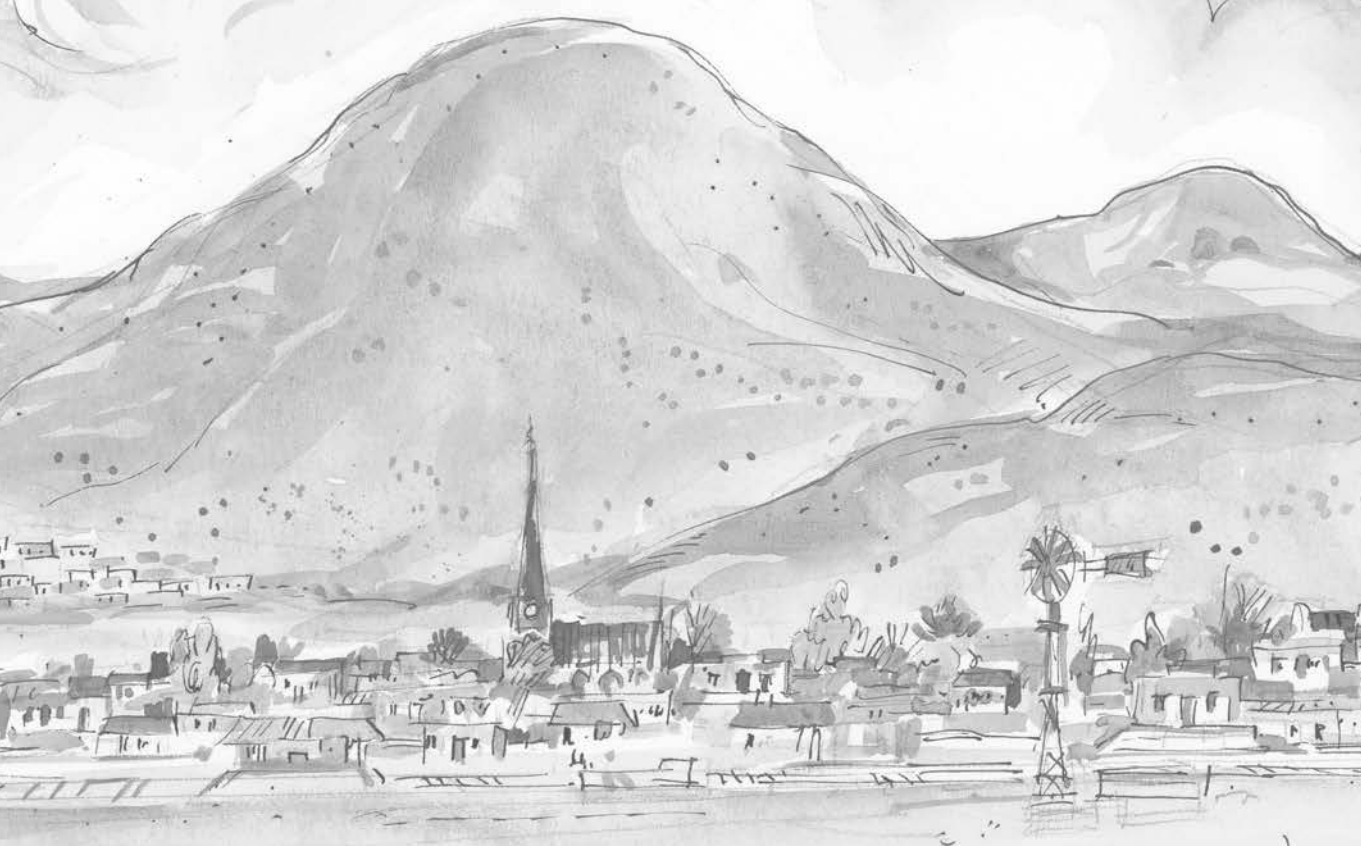
illustrated by TONY GROGAN

FIG JAM AND FOXTROT

Tales of life, love and food in the Karoo

FIG JAM AND FOXTROT

Tales of life, love and food in the Karoo



LYNN BEDFORD HALL

illustrated by TONY GROGAN

Author's acknowledgements

I started with an idea. Slowly translated it into words. About a trillion words. The trillion words turned into stories, which went into my computer to be mulled over, crossed out, rewritten, plots reinvented – oh, it took months of slog and times of despair and then moments of such satisfaction I was heady with bubbles, like a bottle of champagne. Stories done, I had to head for the kitchen for a long, long time, perhaps a million days or so. In the end I had a book. But no – you can't have a book without a team: a publishing manager to give you the green light, offer a contract, appoint an editor, a designer, an illustrator, a proofreader … It's all a case of team work, and in *Fig Jam and Foxtrot* I have had the finest bunch on earth. Linda, bless her, first saw the possibilities and gave me Joy as an editor. Now this woman is a total treasure, and every author should have the privilege of a smiling, incredibly competent Joy Clack on tap. She'll treat your manuscript as though it were a rare diamond. Work long, long hours at shaping it. Quickly detect any flaws. Smooth out the cuts, then give a professional polish. Sean Robertson and Petal Palmer's enthusiasm for Tony's sketches matched my own. We yelped with delight at his brilliant interpretations of the characters and Sean harnessed his own considerable creative talent in painstakingly hand-lettering all the titles, and worked overtime to fit the illustrations in just the right places. My family wasn't part of the team but my thanks certainly extend to them, for they quietly evaluated my work (both literary and gustatory) and – they're very honest, they are – gave me the thumbs up wherever they felt it was due. Now I have finished.

Thanks again, everyone.

Lynn Bedford Hall

First published in 2003 by
Struik Publishers (a division of New Holland Publishing (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd)
Cornelis Struik House
80 McKenzie Street
Cape Town 8001
www.struik.co.za

New Holland Publishing is a member of the Johnnic Publishing Group

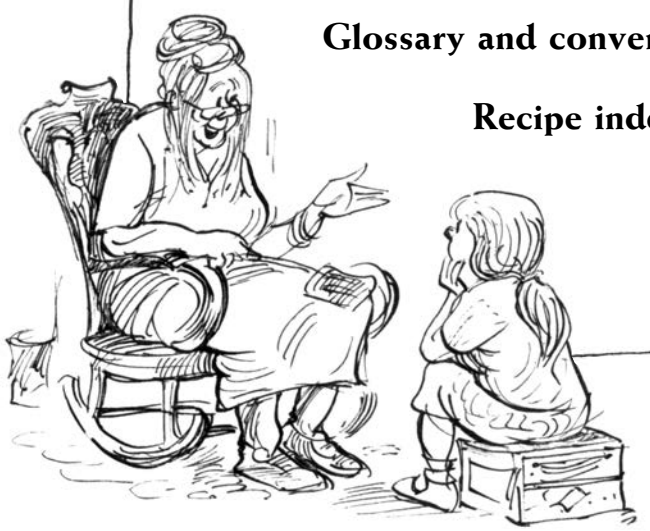
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Publishing Manager: Linda de Villiers
Editor: Joy Clack
Designer: Sean Robertson
Illustrator: Tony Grogan

Reproduction by Hirt & Carter Cape (Pty) Ltd
Printed and bound by Kyodo Printing Co (Singapore) Pte Ltd

ISBN 1 86872 868 4

Contents



Author's Introduction

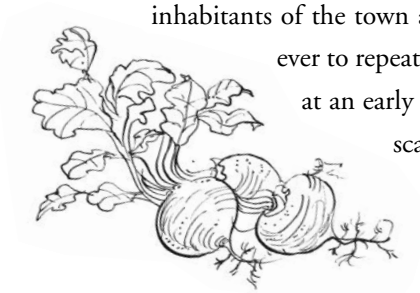
Once upon a time I used to climb the oak tree in our garden and talk to the creatures that lived in the knot-holes in the branches. I knew they were there, I just had to whisper softly for them to hear me. They were my friends and through them I discovered the magical world of make-believe. I couldn't set down these conversations because I couldn't write at that age, but this internal world has never left me. We all have a desire to create and as I grew older my need found expression in two spheres: writing and cooking. I think I was eleven when I had my first poem published. It went something like this:

'My classroom is in such a lovely school
Where trees are shady and leafy and cool.'

I'll spare you the rest. At about the same time I started messing around in the kitchen. My best invention was a milkshake made with condensed milk and ginger ale. Now all this sounds quite horrifying, but everything improved as I grew up, and this is where these stories come into play.

The small Karoo town about which I write exists, but I have altered the name because that allows me more licence. Like all towns, it has changed over the years, but at that time it was simply the happiest place for a child to be, offering glorious freedom in a sheltered world of gentle people. As I remember it, the days were hot and still but for the soft strumming of cicadas; the sunsets were unfailingly brilliant and the night sky as bright as an eternal Christmas tree. I also remember the women: in my child's mind they were always plump and powdered and smelling of eau-de-cologne. They sat me on their laps and gave me slivers of biltong.

Aspects of my home life that probably helped to shape me were my parents' love of books, music and good food. They were a prominent couple in the community. We knew all the inhabitants of the town and district, and I was taught to respect everyone and never, ever to repeat any secrets or gossip. I must, therefore, have become a voyeur at an early age and locked a thousand secrets in my head, for there were scandals aplenty – adulterous affairs and deliciously wicked goings-on – all to be tucked in deep and not spoken about.



And yet, despite the odd bit of scandal, it was a town and district in which lived truly kind and noble people, and the true essence of the place is still as real to me as it ever was. THE STORIES I HAVE WRITTEN ARE, IN A WAY, A TRIBUTE TO THOSE I REMEMBER AND LOVED.

Food plays a big part in small towns. Whether it's a bazaar or a sports meeting, a wedding or a funeral, people eat when they meet. And with no take-aways, home cooking was very important. Women became quite famous for their personal specialities, and you never went visiting without a little gift in a basket. My mother (who loved good food) did not enjoy cooking – we had an excellent cook who took care of that side of things. But her sister, my aunt, who lived on a large farm outside the town, was an adventurous cook with the most wonderful ingredients at hand. So this was the perfect combination – at home I was allowed to occupy the kitchen as much as I liked, and on the farm I could learn from my dear, patient aunt.

Now put all these factors together and perhaps the reason for this book will become clear. In these women of Corriebush, I have been able to interpret my life in a country town, indulge my compulsion to write, and incorporate my career as an author and food and travel journalist. Although the women are fictitious, I have attributed the recipes to them, firstly imagining what they might have cooked and then updating the recipes to suit today's tastes. They have been devised, tried and tested by me, and the result is a book in which fact and fiction are combined to create a cookbook with a difference. I hope it will be an enjoyable read, with some useful recipes, but as Sophia would say, 'Remember, *liefie,* the proof is in the trifle.'

'*Pudding*, Sophia.'

'I *said* pudding.'

Who is Sophia? To find out, read on.

INTRODUCTION

I was born in Corriebush, not far from the railway station. In those days nothing was far from the railway station, because Corriebush was a small town and the station was right there in the middle of it. In fact, it still is, because unlike some Karoo towns, Corriebush never grew big. To this day the town murmurs there quietly, a softly beating heart in the middle of the wrinkled veld. But the trains don't run there anymore. The platform is still there, and so is the railway line. I remember how the trains would shunt off slowly and then, gathering speed, embrace the town in a wide, proud loop before escaping across the veld to the north. But the trains don't run anymore because the council, having observed the dwindling numbers of passengers and half-empty trucks, decided it was a waste of money laying on trains to Corriebush.

And so the town never grew, and today it is almost as it was when I was a child. The same white-washed houses with wide stoeps and gables, flower gardens in the front, vegetables at the back. The same church with a clock and a soaring white steeple. The Corner Shop is still there, and the shopkeepers still lock up over the lunch-hour in summer, so that they can go home to rest behind shutters closed against the midday heat.

A humped mountain cradles Corriebush, and so the rising sun never bursts onto the town. The rays spill gently down the flanks of the berg, and that is why every day dawns slowly and

quietly, soft as a Sunday. By late afternoon the sweltering sun has burnt itself out, and it simply falls abruptly into a hole at the edge of the veld. That is what I believed, anyway, and I imagined that it lay there panting until darkness came and smothered its flames, and the night dropped down in a hush of yellow stars. Sometimes, tucked up in my bed, I would hear a baboon barking in a distant mountain kloof. But I was safe and snug and I knew that, next day, the sun would once again flow down the mountain and into my town. This was a wonderful place in which to grow up and my childhood was innocent and happy.

The stories I hold come from Aunt Lovey.

Aunt Lovey lived in the house next door. Her real name was Miss Lavelle Douw, but nobody called her that. It was always Aunt Lovey, or Tannie or Aunty but never Lavelle, and only the *dominee* called her Miss Douw. In a way, Aunt Lovey could be called the founder of Corriebush, for she was there from the time the first people bought plots and built houses.

Originally, the whole area had belonged to her father, Kerneels Douw, who had inherited the family farm from *his* father round about the end of the nineteenth century. But a cruel drought lasting five years had forced Kerneels to sell off portions of his land to avoid going bankrupt. In time, these little plots joined up and Corriebush was born – a cluster of houses spread around the old Douw homestead. No longer able to farm sheep, Kerneels sold off his stock and turned to small-scale vegetable farming, and so the family was able to stay on their land.

When her parents died within a month of each other, Aunt Lovey locked their bedroom door and never opened it again. She stayed on in the old home, growing vegetables and breeding fine Austrolorp fowls, and when she wasn't busy with either her garden or her hens, she would sit on the front stoep or, in bad weather, in the *voorkamer*, and watch what she called the goings-on in the town. She knew all the inhabitants by name, and also knew exactly what was happening in each house, not only because she had been right there from the beginning, but because her house was in the middle of the village and everyone loved to visit. Dropped in for tea. Shared their news. Cried on her shoulder. Aunt Lovey was such a plump and comforting presence, like a warm eiderdown, that people would tell her things. Secrets. And she would hold their hands and never scold, and never judge. She would just sit and listen and look at them with her soft, kind eyes.

Aunt Lovey's eyes were like the inside of a perlemoen shell. They were blue and green and aquamarine all at once, and when she heard a sad story they would grow misty, like the sea. Sometimes they would fill with tears, and I swear her tears were like drops from a rainbow,

running down her plump, powdered cheeks from the corners of those mother-of-pearl eyes. I have never seen eyes like that since, but when I come across a perlemoen shell on a beach, I feel I am looking into them again.

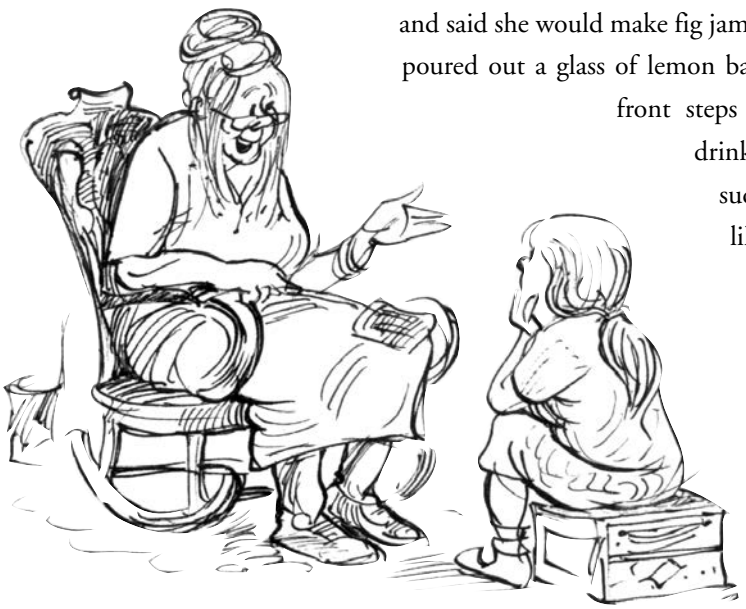
Aunt Lovey's yellow-brown hair was thick and wavy and she wore it in a plait coiled on the top of her head, like a rope of butterscotch toffee. Sometimes, strands of the plait would work loose and hang down, all spangled with hairpins. They would drop down her neck or into her bosom and she would grab a fly swatter and clap it on her shoulders so that the hairpins would clatter onto the stoep on either side of her chair. '*Ag*, such useless thingamabobs.'

And when I crouched down to pick them up she would swish her skirt to one side in order to help me find them.

Aunt Lovey held her skirts in place by tying a bright sash very tightly round her middle, with a floppy bow at the back. And being so short and plump, the tight sashes would push her top up and her bottom down, so that she seemed to come in two halves, like a cottage loaf. Her shoes were tightly laced and flat, with rounded toes like polished pebbles. They caused her to tripple a little, from side to side, when she walked.

Trippling along, always smiling, arms stretched out in welcome, perfumed with lavender and a hint of buchu – that's how I remember her. If I shut my eyes I can see her precisely.

The first time she told me a story was when, having finished my homework one afternoon, I decided to take her some figs from the tree in our back garden. She clapped her hands when she saw the basket of plump, furry fruit, and said she would make fig jam, and give me a jar. Then she poured out a glass of lemon barley, and while I sat on her front steps and sipped the sweet-sour drink, Aunt Lovey's eyes grew suddenly distant and dreamy, like an overcast summer sky.



'*Ag,* child, 'she began. 'Figs. Green figs, purple figs. Once, we had a whole orchard of fig trees. When we still owned a lot of land. We had so many figs my

mother used to invite all the farmer's wives over for a day to come and make jam and preserve, and the kitchen would be full of figs and sugar and bubbling pots and noisy women. *Tannies.*

Oh, there was terrible steam and noise and my mother hadn't any time for me then. They were so busy that no one took any notice of me, so one day I picked up a hat belonging to Aunt Sarie from Wilgersfontein. It was lying on a chair in the hall, a big bonnet with flowers in the front, and I turned it upside down and poured a jar of hot preserve into it. And then I just stood there in the middle of the kitchen, waiting.'

Aunt Lovey shook with laughter as she remembered the scene. 'Goodness child, how those ladies screamed! They all turned from their jobs, looked at me, and screamed. So I turned the bonnet upside down and the soft, syrupy figs plopped all over the kitchen floor. Tant Sarie ran to pick up her bonnet, slipped on the figs and fell flat on her back. Out came such a hiccup, it was like a balloon bursting. She was hefty too, a really big lady, and it took three of them to help her stand up again. My mother took me to my bedroom, banged the door shut, sat me on the bed and bent over with laughter.'

'"That was wicked," she said, holding her hand to her mouth so that the laughter wouldn't come through, only the words, hoping that the ladies in the kitchen were listening. "You're a very naughty girl. Into bed with you, and no supper tonight."'

Aunt Lovey's chair shook now as she laughed, its rockers going screech-clop on the stone stoep. 'Yes, figs. Thank you child. You must come again.'

'Thank you Aunt Lovey, I will.'

And I did, and that was the beginning of the Corriebush stories. The telling took many years. At first Aunt Lovey was very careful about how much she would tell a child, and she edited her stories with great care. For years she told me only the funny ones, over and over; stories devoid of any bad language – or worse – sexual capers. But as I grew older she became more daring, letting me into darker secrets, although she never referred to sensitive matters in plain language. 'A little bit of foxtrot' meant there was something sexy involved. 'A hand in the biscuit tin' meant someone had stolen something. Aunt Lovey was simply too good a person to gossip, and she left it to me, as I grew older and more mature, to read the adult meanings into her words.

By the time I left Corriebush at the age of twenty-two, I was able to piece each story together. Fill in the gaps. They had taken many years in the telling and if I get stuck now, when writing this, I need only shut my eyes and travel back again to Aunt Lovey's stoep.

'Tell me the story again about Sannie and the flags.'

'Then bring me my spectacles, child.'

When Aunt Lovey told a story she always wore her spectacles. She never looked through them, she always looked over the top, letting them sit on her nose. Spectacles in place, she would smooth her skirt over her plump knees, lean back in her rocker until it creaked, tip her head and look through the fanlight in the corrugated-iron roof.

Then her eyes would mist over and she would sigh. '*Ag,* child.' (Even when I had come of age, she still called me child.) 'Here, take a biscuit. You see, it happened like this.'

Sometimes the story took weeks to finish, but I never pressed her. I knew when she was tired, and I would go home then and write it all down and not tell anyone. Not until now. For Aunt Lovey has gone, and all the people she told me about – they, too, have gone.

But perhaps their ghosts still wander about Corriebush, for it's a place that is not easy to leave or forget.

BETSIE

When Betsie de Waal told her parents that she had been invited to The Annual Stockfair Ball they were delighted. Betsie was Hendrik and Gertie's only child. A fine woman, a devoted daughter and a cause of great anxiety to her parents.

'Thirty years old and no man has ever looked at her. It breaks a mother's heart,' Gertie often sighed.

The women of Corriebush regularly discussed the subject at their tea parties. Match-making was of deep concern to them, and Betsie's case was of great importance. Because they were naturally gentle, kindly women, they were reluctant to put the truth about Betsie into words. Instead, they pretended to be totally puzzled, clicking their tongues and frowning into their cups.

'Such a lovely nature. So friendly. Always ready with a smile and a little joke. Capable too! No one can bake like Betsie can.'

And then one afternoon, Nellie lost patience with all the sweet talk and spoke bluntly.

'Come now. We all know that Betsie is a good and honest woman, but she *is* rather hefty, and has absolutely no feminine tricks. And a man – being the silly creature he is – likes a woman who will tease him a little, flutter her eyelashes, play with her necklace, that sort of thing.'

Anna found her tongue. 'You're right, Nellie. When it comes to flirting, Betsie doesn't have the faintest. Never mind the necklaces.'

'Hands like spades and walks like a farmer,' put in Lily.

'Huge strides and big feet. You can hear her coming down the street before she's even out of the bakkie, poor child.'

'It's because she grew up helping Hendrik on the land. Driving tractors, fixing windmills, they say she can even shear a sheep. Out in all weathers too, no wonder her skin looks like it does.'

Sophia shifted uneasily, thinking they were being a bit harsh.

'Well you can't expect a young woman to work like a carthorse and look like the Queen of England, can you?'

'No,' Anna conceded. 'And of course her hair is beautiful.'

And indeed it was. A waterfall that hung to her waist. Thick and curly, and an astonishing red, shot with gold. Left to itself, Betsie could have worn it like a cloak, but she said it got in the way, reminded her of an Angora goat, and so wore it scraped back and tightly plaited.

'I was visiting once when she was getting ready for bed and came to say goodnight to her parents. Her hair was loose and she wore a white nightdress and I tell you, she looked like a fairytale, if you know what I mean.'

'What I can't understand is how Hendrik and Gertie are happy with it all.'

'With what all?'

'Her planting potatoes and so on.'

Truth was, they weren't. They would have been so delighted to have their daughter sitting quietly at home sewing, perhaps preparing a trousseau. Of course Hendrik did appreciate her help, especially not having a son and him getting on in years, and Gertie was equally grateful for Betsie's help in the kitchen and the wonderful meals she prepared.

'We must be thankful for her energy and devotion,' they often told each other. 'But what will happen when we pass on one day? She can't stay here alone on the farm.'

It was a real problem. And so when Betsie came with the news that she had been invited to The Ball, they were truly thrilled.

'And who,' beamed Hendrik, 'is the lucky man?'

Betsie guessed what their reaction would be, so she answered defiantly, for so good-natured a daughter.

'Hamish McAndrew!'

Hendrik leapt up as though she'd thrown a snake in his lap and Gertie burst into tears.

Hamish McAndrew was a Scot who farmed in the district, and the fact that he had never been accepted by the community was altogether his fault.

The Corriebush townsfolk and farmers always made an effort to welcome newcomers. So they had visited Hamish, bearing bottles of brandy, freshly baked pies and jars of preserves. Then, having paid their respects, they had naturally discussed him. And all had agreed that Hamish McAndrew was 'a funny man'.

'Gruff,' one of them noted. 'Didn't even ask us inside.'

'Us neither,' another chimed in.

'Polite enough, though, took the roast chicken and said thank you very much. Definitely a foreign accent. Must be descended from one of those interfering Scottish missionaries who came out in the last century.'

'Well, what I say is why does a man come here without a family, buy a farm, live there alone, not talking much and no curtains even? Did you notice that?'

'He needs a woman. But with that moustache?'

'Quite handsome, though, in a way,' Lily conceded. 'Big, strong man. But what does he know about sheep, I wonder?'

In time, however, they grew used to Hamish. He would attend stockfairs and pay good prices, cash, for sheep and cattle, and he always returned their greetings and doffed his broad-brimmed hat. But, having bought his stock, he would climb into his bakkie and drive off back to his farm, never taking time to pass the time of day. Their daughters, always on the look-out for a husband when a new man arrived in the district, soon gave up.

'A lost cause,' they decided.

And then Hamish asked Betsie to The Ball. Walked right up to where she was standing in the Corner Shop one Saturday morning, having come to town for provisions, and without lowering his voice he issued the invitation. Betsie blushed, and accepted, and that was that.

'No good will come of this,' Gertie told Hendrik after they had both calmed down. 'But what can we do?'

In a way she was half relieved that Betsie had been noticed, but one thing could lead to another.

'What if they get married, Hendrik? Our Betsie to a Scot? The man's not one of us. After all, what does he know about the Great Trek? And Piet Retief?'

'Don't be silly old woman. It's just a dance.'

Every year, everyone in Corriebush and the district went to The Ball. The husbands and fathers, the wives and mothers sat on chairs around the perimeter of the dance floor and watched while their daughters – in their long, full-skirted dresses of lace and tulle – swirled around the floor to the waltz and the foxtrot, with plenty of Paul Jones' in between.

Betsie wore a long, pink dress with rosebuds and puffed sleeves, her red mop swept up in a ribbon, and everyone agreed that she looked surprisingly attractive.

Hamish wore a tartan kilt. They were shocked. Betsie did not seem to mind that his legs were showing, and it had to be said that he really could waltz. His back was straight, his dark hair smoothly sleeked, his moustache waxed and twirled. He even smiled at her as they swept around the room. And Betsie was gone.

It was a quiet wedding, no fuss, because Hendrik was struggling a bit, and no honeymoon. They went straight to Hamish's farm, Sweetwater, after the ceremony. And overnight, as it were, Betsie became a new woman.

'Never known anyone to change like that,' the women remarked, after visiting. 'She's even wearing rouge.'

'And high heels.'

'Perfume too. She's still our Betsie, but she certainly is different.'

'She's quite the lady now. You can be sure she won't be working on the land anymore.'

'And did you see the curtains she's made? I didn't even know Betsie could sew.'

It was all true. Betsie had emerged like a butterfly from a pupa and in no time transformed the dull, dreary house into a comfortable home. It was still sparsely furnished – Hamish had been a bachelor for a long time – but there were cushions on the chairs now and flowers in the vases and the kitchen was always dense with the aroma of baking.

Betsie was delighted when the women came to call. If she looked through the window and saw a puff of dust on the road leading up to the farm, she would blush with excitement.