

THE WITCH'S STORY

By Allen Walsh November 2007

It was in 1975 that my wife, Janet, first met the witch.

Janet had been aware for some time that the old lady who leant on her front gate and gazed at the children in the playground of the Infant School opposite was referred to as 'the witch' when the children talked among themselves, and that some children would veer away from her if they passed her house. Nobody seemed to talk to her.

The lady had a deeply lined face and straggly grey hair pulled back and held by a comb. The dress she wore had seen better days. Her house was narrow, built of timber with a verandah across the front and a wire mesh front fence at the edge of the street footpath.

The Infant School formed one half of Albert Park State School No. 1181 and had been built in 1914 to reduce the pressure of numbers in the 'big school' situated about half a mile away in the centre of Albert Park.

It was an interesting building and very different from most of the impersonal state schools built earlier. There was a large central hall with doorways giving direct access to five classrooms arranged on three sides. The hall had a polished timber floor (no stage) and a lofty timber framed roof lined with stained boards. In the gables at each end were coloured leadlight panels depicting Australian native birds and animals – kookaburras, parrots, kangaroos and koalas.

The whole triangular site was surrounded by a high chainwire fence and a caretaker's cottage occupied one corner. The wide streets surrounding the site had generous grassed nature strips which were kept mown by members of the Parents' Committee using motor mowers borrowed from the Council gardeners' compound.

In our children's time a small area of playground had been fenced off for use as a zoo or farmyard so that city children could meet and look after the sort of animals that might be found on a farm. There was a very greedy goat, a sheep which had been saved as a lamb at the abattoirs, guinea pigs, white rabbits and a bossy colourful bantam rooster. An even bossier resident was a white goose which met his match when he tried to attack a dog through the wire mesh fence and had half his beak chewed off.

Lindy was a pupil at the Infant School and this particular afternoon as Janet, Lindy and Ainsley crossed the road on their way to pick up Peter at the Big School, they noticed that the lady appeared agitated. Then she spoke "Would you be able to help me, my dear?" The lady said she had accidentally locked herself out of the house. She had managed to prise up the lower half of the single window which opened onto the front verandah, but age and arthritis prevented her climbing in. Janet found it relatively easy to climb in over the low sill and open the front door.

The old lady was very grateful and as they stood at the gate she started to tell Janet why she spent so much time looking across at the school. She said that in the 1920's her only daughter was a pupil at the infant school, but had died in a diphtheria epidemic in 1929. She was still suffering from the loss but sometimes she would see a fair-haired

girl going in the school gate and she would remember again the few short but happy years with her Angelina.

Janet was sympathetic to her sad tale and over the next few weeks they often stood together at the gate or sat on kitchen chairs on the verandah while the story of her life which had been pent-up so long spilled out.

The lady's name was Mrs Fowler.

She had been born Mary Sheridan in Manchester where her grandparents had settled after migrating from Tipperary following the potato famine in Ireland in the 1840's. Her grandfather and later, her father, had worked in the cotton mills.

During World War 1 Mary worked as a domestic in a military hospital set up in a large house a little south of Manchester, in Cheshire. It was here that she met her future husband, Henry Fowler, always known as 'Harry'.

Harry was an Australian who had been seriously injured by a shell in France in 1917. His left arm had been shattered and after the doctors had fixed the broken bones, some metal fragments remained and would be with him for the rest of his life.

Harry first saw and spoke to Mary as she cleaned the large ward he was in.

The domestic staff were not expected to speak to the patients, but Harry noticed the 19 year-old girl with long black hair held back in a bun and flashing dark eyes, and she felt compelled to answer his questions – where did she come from and what was her name?

One day he called her over while she was mopping the floor and said that he was now allowed to get up and walk around the building and grounds, and he would like her to walk down to the lake with him.

The lake was formed years before by damming a stream which ran through the estate, and there was a small boathouse with 3 or 4 rowing boats which were available to nurses and soldiers when they had time to use them.

Mary pointed out that there were rules preventing domestic staff fraternising with the soldiers, but the tall fair-haired Harry said that rules were made for British soldiers, but Australian soldiers made their own rules. Mary was very hesitant, but the persuasive Harry got her to agree to go with him after she finished her shift on the following day. Next afternoon they met near the tradesman's entrance and walked slowly down a path leading to the lake. The boathouse was in need of repair, but the three boats moored at the small jetty appeared sea-worthy.

They sat for a while on a seat near the jetty admiring the views in the warm late afternoon sunshine, then Harry said "Why don't we go for a row?" Mary reminded him again of the rules for domestics and said she was concerned about his damaged left arm.

He said that while they were sitting there he had worked out how to do it – if they sat side by side on the centre seat, he could row with his right arm while she used two hands on the other oar.

They cautiously climbed down the short wooden ladder fixed to the edge of the jetty. Mary sat down on the seat and Harry lifted the looped rope off the mooring post.

Harry had often rowed as a boy in hired boats with his mates on Lake Wendouree in Ballarat, but this was different. Mary had no idea of how to row a boat and she was giggling so much that they were getting nowhere. Eventually Harry said "Look! You just dip your oar into the water and give a steady pull. I will try to copy the force of your pull on my side and we should get somewhere."

Harry wasn't at all concerned about 'getting somewhere' but while they were seated close side by side they could have gone around in circles for all he cared!

As the sun was getting close to the horizon they made their way back to the jetty, climbed out, and dropped the rope loop back over the post.

In the following weeks they often walked down to the lake, sometimes just for the walk and sometimes going for a row, something which seemed to improve with practice.

Mary boarded with a widow in a small village less than two miles from the hospital and Harry would walk her home late in the day and be back himself in time for 'Lights Out'.

Harry was a very forthright character and told Mary that he was going to marry her and take her back to Australia whether she liked it or not. Mary didn't know whether she loved Harry, but could see no future for herself in industrial England and she had been impressed by Harry's wonderful stories about the land of sunshine where everyone was equal. She agreed to marry him.

The war in France dragged on through 1918 and at one stage the Germans threw everything into what they saw as a final push. The Allies held them back and then in late 1918 after the Australian General John Monash was given command of a force which included Australian, British and American divisions they counter-attacked in a brilliant action which eventually led to the end of that dreadful war.

Mary and Harry were married in a Registry Office in mid-1918 and with news of the end of the war in November they thought they would soon be sailing for Australia.

It was not that simple.

It was nearly twelve months later that Harry was able to board a steamer taking hundreds of soldiers back to Australia and nearly another year before Harry could go to Port Melbourne to be re-united with Mary on Australian soil.

Harry thought it would be straight-sailing after that. He and Mary would go back to the sheep station where his father was still manager and he would continue the life he had left years before.

How wrong he was!

A boundary-rider's job meant more than just riding a horse. He had forgotten the hard (and often heavy work) of repairing fences and gates whether made of wire, timber or dry-stone wall construction.

Harry had returned to live in the large bluestone manager's house with his parents and sister and was able to get work drafting sheep or as a rouseabout in the shearing shed.

Soon after Harry met Mary at Port Melbourne they boarded the steam train and travelled to Ballarat.

After coming out of the elaborate station building with the tall white clock tower rising above a triple-arched portico they were met by Harry's father who gave Mary a warm welcome and put her modest suitcases in the box at the back of the four-wheeled buggy drawn by two bay horses.

The day was hot with a north wind and Mary was thankful that the hood had been folded out to give some protection from the sun.

Mr Fowler, who had a walrus moustache and a friendly manner, was on the driver's seat.

They left Ballarat, and after travelling through hills which still showed the scars of the gold-rush years, they went through the township of Sheeptown and crossed the bridge over the creek.

After driving ten miles through open country they swung through an impressive gateway with heavy stone piers on each side and travelled down a long gravelled driveway leading to the station homestead.

Mary made the mistake of commenting on the large flocks of sheep in the fields, and was told that they were actually mobs of sheep in paddocks.

The drive ran in a wide curve around a large stone house surrounded by tall trees and gardens, then they pulled up outside a smaller but still substantial two storey Manager's house.

As Harry led the way to the entrance door located below a long verandah, Mary started to have misgivings. What if they didn't like her?

Inside they turned from a wide hallway into a sitting room where two women were seated. Harry introduced his mother and sister, Janice. They were similarly dressed in long black frocks made from what looked like expensive material. Mrs Fowler had white hair and was wearing a white lace collar and a double string of pearls.

Mary could feel the two women sizing her up and was glad that the pale grey frock she had made herself did not have a short skirt.

She was told that arrangements had been made for Harry and Mary to live in a timber cottage on the property, which had been built before the war for the use of an overseer.

They moved in, but over the next few weeks she found that life in Australia was far removed from the rosy pictures painted by Harry.

Growing up in Manchester she was accustomed to being treated as a second-class citizen because her family was considered to be 'Irish', but Harry had said that people in Australia were treated as equal.

As time went by, although Harry was kept busy with the sheep and in constant contact with the other men on the property, he realised that Mary was desperately unhappy as she felt isolated in her little cottage and shunned by the Fowler women. The shearers and other men would often call a greeting as they went past and sometimes stop to talk to her, but as she was recognised as part of the boss's family, they were careful to keep their distance.

Harry applied for a Soldier Settlement Block and although the Commission was satisfied that he had the necessary farming experience his medical report counted against him. He was steadily getting more feeling and strength into his left arm, but they were concerned that he would not be able to do the day-to-day heavy lifting required on a farm.

Each year since his return he had donned his Light Horse Uniform complete with slouch hat with emu feather and service medals, and caught the train to Melbourne to join in the Anzac Day march.

The Shrine of Remembrance was not yet built, but he always managed to catch up with several of his fellow soldiers whom he had served with in the trenches in France.

One of these was 'Curly' Harris. Curly's real name was Rupert, but he had gone by his nickname since boyhood. He was short and stocky, and although rough spoken he was well known among his friends for his generosity. He called everybody 'mate'.

On one Anzac Day, after he had heard about Harry missing out on the Soldier Settlement Block and the isolation of Mary, Curly said "Listen, Mate! Why don't you come down to Melbourne with me and the boys? I'm living in Port Melbourne now, and I know everyone! Port is just like a village and we all look after each other. I could get you a job on the wharves and you wouldn't have a worry in the world. If Mary wanted to, she could get a job at the biscuit factory where my sister works."

When Harry pointed out that his left arm was no good for heavy lifting, Curly said "Don't worry about that! We are all in the Union and we decide where and when we work. We all have to turn up early in the morning, then the stevedoring bosses select those who are to work that day. I am in charge of one of the work gangs and I would be able to look after you."

Harry went home, discussed the prospect with Mary, who thought it would have to be better than their present situation and agreed to give it a go.

Three weeks later they loaded their few items of furniture on a carrier's cart and headed for Melbourne.

Curly had arranged for them to rent a small weatherboard cottage from an uncle of his. It was located in St Vincent Street, Albert Park, near the Port Melbourne end.

The house was conveniently placed to the wharves where Curly, true to his word, got Harry a job. They soon settled in and after paying rent for two years, they were able to buy the house when the Uncle, George Grant decided to buy a larger investment property.

Although the house was small and very old, Mary was happier than she had been for many years. She was able to resume going to church regularly, something she could not do in the country, and she felt welcome at St Joseph's in Port Melbourne.

Harry was also enjoying life. He could handle the work comfortably and his workmates, all union members, were loyal to each other as the soldiers had been in the war. Harry knew that some of these men had been in trouble with the Law, but the details of their transgressions were never discussed.

Mary found that many of these tough men, who could swear non-stop all day at work, would apologise profusely to nearby women if they accidentally let slip a 'damn' outside the hotels or shops in Bay Street.

After arrangements to buy the house had been completed, Harry set to work with enthusiasm. He bought himself a few tools and found that he had an aptitude for carpentry. The old house had not been well maintained, but appeared to be structurally sound. All the rooms were lined inside with tongue and groove pine boards on walls and ceilings. He repaired these, and where necessary, replaced them with boards bought from the timber yard behind the huge hardware shop in Bay Street. Then he painted the whole place, inside and out.

Because he was doing shift work, he usually got home in the middle of the afternoon, and except in mid-winter there were plenty of daylight hours for the job. Later he built a small shed in the back yard and planted the remaining area with vegetables.

Mary said "The place is so run-down now, you would never believe how nice it was. There was a golden privet hedge across here behind the front fence", as she waved a hand in the direction of a strip of bare dirt.

Mary and Harry were now able to relax and enjoy themselves. They made many friends among the other young couples in the neighbourhood, and as well as going to the beach at the end of Pickles Street in warm weather, they could walk up to the shady St Vincent Gardens, and go with other couples to the Saturday night dances at Port Melbourne Town Hall, a venue they preferred rather than the South Melbourne Town Hall because it was smaller and most of their friends went there. They liked the Old Time dances – the type that their parents and grandparents had danced in earlier years.

They would sometimes visit the two great piers jutting out into Hobsons Bay where the overseas liners docked, and would occasionally see a windjammer – the last of the breed that took wool to England around Cape Horn.

On warm summer nights they could walk along the beachfront watching the sun go down, then the lights of Williamstown light up across the bay.

Sometimes they would go to the open-air cinema in Beaconsfield Parade near Victoria Avenue to laugh at the silent antics of Charlie Chaplin or The Keystone Kops, then buy fish and chips wrapped in newspaper to eat on their way home.

Then she arrived!

'She' was a six-pound baby girl whom they had despaired of ever having.

Mary was extremely happy, but Harry could hardly contain himself. He had always had a cheerful nature, but now he had a permanent grin which he wore everywhere. It was almost as though no other couple had ever had a baby!

As soon as she was old enough to go outside, he would put the baby in a white woven cane pram and seize on any excuse to 'go for a walk'. He knew all the neighbours, and although most of the men would find something to do when they saw him coming, all the women would stop and listen to his stories of this amazing baby.

They decided to name her 'Angelina' after Mary's favourite grandmother, and she was baptised in St. Joseph's Catholic Church. Harry went along for Mary's sake, although he hadn't been to church since before the war. They had completely lost touch with his bigoted Protestant family.

As the baby learnt to crawl, then walk, Harry would still 'go for a walk', holding her tiny hand in his as she trotted along beside him, talking excitedly.

By this time Harry was accustomed to calling her 'my little angel', and, as time passed she looked forward to going to school. It seemed that she had watched other children going to and from the Infant School across the road all her life, and she spoke of it as 'my school' long before her 'First Day'.

Angelina settled in quickly because she already had some friends from the neighbouring families and Mary found the teachers generally to be very friendly and helpful.

At this point the old lady turned and looked across at the schoolground and said "See those tall gum trees in the middle of the playground?" She explained that Harry had helped plant them. The State Schools had an 'Arbour Day' each year and the children would be encouraged to plant trees and grow gardens around the school buildings.

At that time there were fund-raising activities such as euchre nights, in which parents took part. Harry would often go, but Mary preferred to stay at home and look after their daughter.

After one of the card nights Harry said he had been looking at some of the framed photographs of earlier students which had been hung on the walls in the central hall. He had noted some famous names like the Olympic swimmer, Frank Beaurepaire and his swimmer sister Lillian; Charles Ulm who co-piloted planes on many of the pioneering flights of Charles Kingsford-Smith, and 'Skeeter' Fleiter who coined the phrase 'Up there Cazaly' when urging his ruck partner Roy Cazaly to jump for the hit-out when playing football for South Melbourne.

Harry had always been a bit of a dreamer and he said that if other pupils of State School 1181 could rise to the top, why shouldn't their little girl become a great singer or perhaps a ballet dancer? Mary didn't like to dampen his enthusiasm, but thought that if Angelina could grow up to be a happy young woman, she would be satisfied. Angelina had fair hair as Harry did, but it fell to her shoulders in gentle waves just like Mary's own dark hair, and was often tied with a blue ribbon.

Harry had bought Mary a Singer treadle sewing machine when they first went to Melbourne. It was similar to the one her landlady had taught her to use in Cheshire, and she had made her own clothes and Harry's shirts on it.

Now she was able to make Angelina's frocks and coats in a professional manner from paper patterns which were readily available, and she was flattered when other mothers asked her to make clothes for their children.

Life seemed perfect.

Then one day Angelina woke up with a sore throat. Mary thought it was probably just a cold, but to be safe, she took the girl up to the doctor's surgery in one of the grand terrace houses in St Vincent Place.

Mary was concerned that the elderly doctor spent more time than she would have expected examining the girl. Eventually he said "I don't want to alarm you, Mrs Fowler, but there have been a few cases of diphtheria lately among our local children and it seems we might have an epidemic on our hands. Take your little girl home and keep her in a warm bed tonight. Get her to drink water that has previously been boiled, and I will call in first thing on my morning round tomorrow!"

The doctor arrived in his car early the next morning. Mary and Harry had been up all night sitting with the little girl as she gasped for breath, while getting weaker and weaker.

The doctor quickly made an examination then said "You must try to be brave! A membrane commonly associated with diphtheria has already formed across your daughter's windpipe and she cannot get air into her lungs. I have heard reports that overseas doctors are putting tubes directly through the neck and into the windpipe to bypass the obstruction, but I have never done it myself and she is now so weak that I don't think she would withstand the shock of such a procedure." He stayed with them until early afternoon when Angelina peacefully passed away in front of their eyes.

The doctor arranged for the priest and an undertaker to call and just before nightfall the body of the little girl was taken away.

It had all happened so quickly.

That night Mary sobbed continuously, but Harry did not even shed a tear. He felt numb with shock and could not think clearly.

Two days later they stood together in the Catholic section of the Melbourne general cemetery when the small white casket was lowered into a newly-dug grave, a short distance along from the bluestone Catholic Chapel.

Mary and Harry stood to one side, about four graves away and close to an old grave with an elaborate headstone surmounted by a carved stone angel. Harry had not spoken a word to her, and as she glanced sideways she could see his expressionless face with the jaw clamped shut, but still no tears. The Union had taken up a collection to help pay for the burial.

That night was the last Harry spent in their house.

The strong man who had survived three years in the trenches on the Western Front and had recovered from serious injury, had changed.

It was as though something had snapped in his brain and Mary could not get through to him. The house that had resounded with the talk and laughter of a happy little girl was now silent, and Harry apparently found it too hurtful to live there.

Mary found out from Curly that Harry had gone back to work on the wharves for a few days, but had then 'gone on the booze' and disappeared for some time.

Mary did not know what to do. Harry had been her rock and she knew he had signed the pledge to be a teetotaler at the request of his mother when he was a young man. There had always been enough money from Harry's wages for them to live comfortably, but this income had suddenly stopped.

Mary was able to get herself a job at Swallows Biscuits as a Tea lady to get over the immediate problem, but what could she do about Harry?

Curly told her that several of their old friends had tried to speak to Harry when they met him in the street, but he always refused to answer them.

Then the 1930's Depression started and hundreds of local people lost their jobs.

Curly reported that some of their former workmates, now jobless, said they had seen Harry in the queue at the soup kitchens which had opened at the two Town Halls and some of the churches.

Apparently Harry had taken to wearing an old army overcoat all the time, and shuffled along, head down, muttering to himself. Occasionally he would say to a stranger "Have you seen my Angel" and they would quickly walk on, thinking he must be some sort of religious crank.

In those days there were all sorts of strange people living in South and Port Melbourne, and the locals seemed to be able to tolerate them all.

A few years later Curly told Mary that Harry was now living in 'Dudley Flats', an area of wasteland once known as the West Melbourne Swamp, but which had been partly reclaimed by the Board of Works.

As many people lost their houses in the Depression, hundreds (mainly men) drifted to this area and lived in humpies made of corrugated iron, cardboard, and any other materials they could scrounge from the nearby tip.

After several more years, nobody seemed to know or care, what became of Harry Fowler.

As Mary grew older she had less contact with her neighbours. Many of those she had known in earlier years had moved out to the newer suburbs, and the people coming in were not very interested in an old lady. Peter the Postman, however, was a loyal friend. As he rode his bike with the basket on the front along the footpath each morning he

would call "G'day Millie!" to the old Golden Labrador dog lying on the path, and got two swishes of the tail in response. It took too much effort for her to stand up.

Mary was still having milk and bread delivered each day, and occasionally the greengrocer would call, but if she needed something delivered by the boy from the corner shop, Peter would drop in a note for her.

One day as she met him at the gate he noticed that she was leaning on a walking stick. She said she had fallen in the house the previous night, but was not hurt. She was still feeling a bit shaky and that was why she was using the stick.

Peter asked if she had considered going into an old persons home – he knew there was one over in Albert Road, and they were extending their building. Mary said she had wondered about it at times, but had always dismissed the idea because she would not be able to take Millie with her.

Two day later Peter stopped at the gate of Sandy Telfer. Sandy had been a South Melbourne Councillor for many years. He was short, with a genial manner and he and his wife Betty seemed to know everyone in the district.

Peter said he was worried about Mary Fowler and briefly told of his concern. Sandy knew of her – he had lived in the next street nearly as long as Mary had been in the district, but he had never met her. Sandy said that Betty was on the Management Committee of the Home for the Aged, and as a long time resident Mary should qualify for admittance. They agreed that the dog was a problem, but Peter said that he had spoken to his wife, and Millie would be welcome to come and live with him and his wife for her remaining years.

Peter told Sandy that many years before, Mary had told him about the sad death of her only daughter, and was concerned that she had not been able to afford a suitable headstone for her grave. Sandy talked over the situation with Betty during the following days and they spoke to Father Michael, whom they were told was Mary's priest.

They put a proposal to the priest. If Mary could go to the Hostel and Millie to Peter's place, why not suggest that Mary sell her little home which would have increased in value as young couples were moving into the area. Could Father Michael make enquiries about a suitable monument for Angelina's grave and obtain quotes from a monumental mason?

Six months later a small party consisting of Mary, Sandy and Betty with Peter and his wife gathered at the cemetery to view a simple white marble headstone topped by a delicately carved smiling angel. The words engraved on the stone read –

ANGELINA FOWLER
1922-1929
'HARRY'S LITTLE ANGEL'