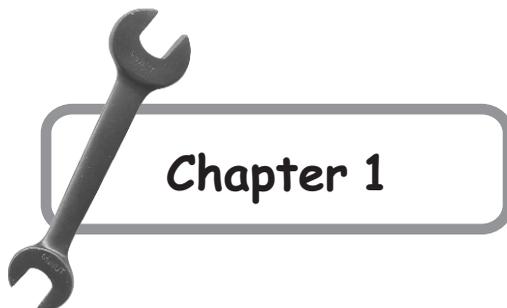


The Mystery of the Missing Magnetos



“What's a magneto?” I asked.

Ronnie gave me a pitying look. “You sure don't know much about this sort of stuff, do you.” He pointed to a small flat ledge on the side of the engine. “It's the gadget that should be sitting here. It makes the electricity for the spark. The engine's useless without it. See these four holes? That's where it was bolted on.”

I had to smile at the look he'd given me. It didn't bug me that he knew so much more than I did about things like magnetos. He'd been mucking around with them from the time he started to walk — probably even before that. I bet he left greasy fingerprints on his baby bottle.

“But why'd anybody pinch it?” I asked. “What's so great about a magneto?” I stood back, bumping into some other machine behind me. The shed was packed with engines and other rusty old stuff I didn't recognize. We'd had to squeeze our way in amongst it all to get to this engine, to see for ourselves that the magneto had been taken. It was sort of like being in a graveyard with all these dusty, silent old relics around us. The small patch of daylight from the open doorway at the far end of the shed put most of this end in the shadows of the machines. It was an old wooden shed with a sagging roof and a dirt floor, and spider webs hanging everywhere. The only sound I could hear was Zac, Ronnie's foxy, snuffing around after rats. He could probably smell traces of the thief who'd been here only a few

hours earlier. It gave me a creepy sort of feeling, thinking about it.

“They're worth big bucks,” Ronnie said in answer to my question. “At least ones like what were here. A Webster Tri-Polar maggie. They're rare as hen's...” CRASH! One of the big double doors suddenly swung open and crashed against the outside wall. Light flooded in, temporarily blinding me. I gasped, blinking to clear my eyes. There was a big man in a uniform standing in the doorway.

“Don't you kids touch anything,” he said in a commanding voice. My eyes adjusted to the light and I recognized the local police sergeant. Behind him stood Ronnie's father, Virgil.

“I already told them not to,” Virgil said, and came into the shed, limping heavily because of his short leg. With his stringy beard and floppy felt hat he looked like one of the farmers from 100 years ago whose photos hung on the walls of the Information Centre. The cop followed and they both came and stood beside the engine Ronnie and I had been looking at.

Virgil pointed to the same spot as Ronnie had. In the light I could now see that the paint on that part of the engine was brighter than the rest. “There, Sarge. You can see where it was.” He shook his head. “Jeez, I hope you blokes can find who took it. We'll be flat out replacing this maggie. We won't be able to use the engine at the Australia Day Carnival now. There's a couple of others gone too, a Bosch and an Auto-Sparker. He knew what he was doing — went for the most valuable ones.”

The cop tilted back his cap and looked around the shed. “They were taken last night, you reckon?”

Virgil nodded, “Must've been. I was in here yesterday, getting things ready for the Carnival. The maggies were definitely on the engines. I locked the doors when I left.” He walked towards the small access door that Ronnie and I had come through, saying over his shoulder, “Have a look at this.”

We all went to the small door. The padlock was lying on the dirt outside. Its shackle bar had been cut through. The sergeant knelt down beside the lock. “Bolt cutters,” he said. “Has anybody touched this?”

Virgil looked at Ronnie and me. Ronnie said, “No, Dad.” He then said to the sergeant, “He would have left fingerprints on it, hey?”

“Maybe,” the cop replied, straightening up. “We’ll check it out.” He then looked outside to the sagging barbed wire fence just behind the shed, and asked, “Is that your back boundary?”

Virgil nodded. “It’s probably where he got through.” This was what Ronnie and I also reckoned. The two side boundaries of the Museum grounds had good high fences, being shared with neighbours who had helped pay for them. The front boundary was the road. Anybody coming in that way would have to come past the caretaker’s residence where Ronnie and his family lived. And nothing moved around there at night without Zac hearing, and barking his little white head off.

“Not much security,” The cop said critically. “You’re making it easy for anyone who wants to sneak in.”

Virgil looked upset. “A proper security fence back here is going to cost thousands. The Council won’t come at it. They reckon the Society’s got to raise the dough. We’re working on it but... oh hell, there’s never enough money. If you can’t recover these maggies we’ll have to cough up about two grand for replacements — providing we can find others that the owners will part with.”

“Uh huh,” said the cop, sounding uninterested in the Historical Society’s money worries. He pointed to the bush beyond the back fence. “That’s the old Doolans’ place isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Virgil answered. “We’ve...” He stopped as the clanging of a bell sounded loudly. Well, not a bell really, it was a piece of a big steel pipe that hung from a tree branch outside the dining

area. Someone was hitting it with the steel bar that hung beside the pipe. “Smoko,” Virgil explained to the cop, who was looking to where the sound came from. “Want a cuppa? Or do you want to keep searching for clues?”

“I could use a cuppa,” the cop said, hitching his belt up under his gut. “I’ll come back here after.” Virgil led the way and we all trooped through the Museum grounds to the dining area, passing the tractor shed where machines with names like Twin City, Waterloo Boy, Field Marshall, Bulldog, and others were lined up in rows. Past the truck shed with its Macks, Thornycrofts and Albions. Then past the steam shed where the big old traction engines and portables waited for someone to light up their fires. As we were passing the lagoon Zac zipped off to chase the ducks like he always did. There was a miniature railway track running around the lagoon where the local model makers ran a little steam train that could carry passengers. We walked down the narrow street between the slab and weatherboard buildings that made up the historical village: the church, the butcher’s shop, the schoolroom, the service station, the smithy, and others. I’d got to know them all pretty well, and the displays inside them. I loved the place. The theft of the magnetos was the first disturbing thing that had happened here since I started coming. That was about a year ago — soon after we’d moved to Toomaroo.

The usual crowd of volunteers were gathered in the dining area, pouring from the teapots and arranging themselves at the tables. There were a few visitors there too, sharing smoko with the workers. I saw another cop sitting at one of the tables with a notepad in front of him. I guessed he’d been asking questions. The place was quieter than usual this morning, as if they all felt something of the intrusion into the place that I felt. Normally these people would be talking and laughing at each other’s jokes. That was a lot of the reason why I came here; it was like

being part of a big happy family.

The sergeant went and sat beside his mate. Rose, Ronnie's mother, went over to them with a tray of cakes that she and the other ladies would have baked. The ladies, and the girls who helped them, were dressed in everyday clothes today. During the Carnival they'd all be in old-time dresses with aprons and bonnets, doing things like spinning wool on spinning wheels and cooking dampers in Dutch ovens covered with the hot coals of a wood fire.

Ronnie and I sat at the same table as his father and his mates. These were men who talked what had once seemed another language to me — spannertalk I called it. They used all sorts of words I'd never heard before I came here. Things like banjo unions and governor weights had never been discussed by my parents in my lifetime — and that was over twelve years. Ronnie was about a year older than me. He'd spent so much of his life with these men that he sounded like one himself.

“Any clues?” Clarrie asked Virgil. Clarrie was the Museum's electric specialist. He'd been an electrician with the Railways before he'd retired. I wanted to ask him about magnetos but this didn't seem the right occasion. I'd go and see him in his little workroom some other time.

“Nothing obvious, apart from the lock,” Virgil answered. “They haven't started looking properly yet. The Sarge's going to fingerprint things after smoko.”

“That could take a while,” Sid commented dryly, looking across to where the fat sergeant was helping himself to another cake. I tried to stifle a giggle. Sid looked at me, “Somethin' the matter, young Tip?” he asked. Sid was the machinist. He worked the lathe, making and repairing parts for all the machines around the place. He was always making me laugh.

Grinning, I shook my head. They all called me Tip here. I hadn't known why until Ronnie had explained it. His full name

was Ronald, of course. He told me there had once been a company called Ronaldson-Tippett who used to make engines somewhere down south. He'd shown me a couple of big old engines in the shed, with "Ronaldson Bros. & Tippett" on their nameplates. Apparently old-engine collectors called these Ronnie-Tippetts. The people at the Museum reckoned that Ronnie and I were partners too, that's how I got to be called Tip.

Ronnie's mum came by with a tray and placed a cup of tea each in front of Virgil, Ronnie and me. I thanked her and she gave me a smile, saying, "We've got some of your favourite today, Tip — lemon meringue tart. I'll bring you a piece." Ronnie heard this and started to say something. She stalled him by saying, "Don't panic. You'll get some too."

I started sipping tea from my mug. It was a drink I'd hardly touched before I came here. Nearly everybody drank tea. I sat there listening to the men discussing the robbery, speculating on what type of person might have stolen the magnetos. Such things were too big, apparently, for someone to tuck under his shirt and walk out through the gate with. Besides, visitors had to walk back through the Information Centre before reaching the gate, and the ladies in there were always on the lookout for anyone trying to smuggle things out. There was a lot of valuable stuff in the Museum.

Someone touched me on the shoulder. I looked up and saw Lucy, Ronnie's older sister, standing there with a plate of some of their mother's great lemon meringue tart. "Mum asked me to give you this," she said, smiling at the way my eyes must have lit up. She put the plate on the table and both Ronnie and I grabbed a slice.

"Hey, what's this? Favouritism!" Sid called out indignantly.

"We need to fire up Tip's brain cells," Lucy said. "I want him to help me sort out a problem we're having with the computer." She turned to me, "Could you come into the office later and see if

you can fix it, Tip?" she asked.

I had a mouth full so I nodded in agreement.

"Bah! Computers," Virgil said disgustedly. "We used to manage alright without the damn things."

Lucy patted him on the head, "You mean back in the days of Henry Ford? Sorry, old mate, but time marches on. The information age has arrived."

Virgil shook his head and muttered something rude about the information age. Sid said, "No crank handles. That's the trouble, Lucy. Go find a computer with a crank handle and your dad'll be right in it, just like young Tip." The others around the table chuckled at Sid's joke.

I copped a fair bit of ribbing from the old blokes on the topic of computers. Like Virgil, most of them seemed to think of computers as some sort of threat. I'd tried to explain how useful the Internet could be, and how email could keep them in touch with groups like ours all over the world. But they just weren't interested. Even Ronnie wouldn't do much more than the basic word processing stuff we learnt in school. Like his father, he was happier working with machinery from a bygone era. Gears and pistons ruled here. Silicon chips were unwelcome at the Toomaroo Pioneer Museum and Historical Village.

A while later, when smoko time was finishing up and people were wandering back to whatever they'd been doing, one of the lady visitors came over and asked Virgil something about draft horses. He was an expert on the topic. The Museum kept three of these big animals that were used for ploughing demonstrations and working the horse-driven machines. It was wonderful watching the horses, they *knew* what to do, not like the tractors that only did what the operators demanded.

While Virgil was talking Ronnie gave me a nudge and said, "Let's go and watch the cops do the finger prints."

"Okay, I replied. "But I'd better duck into the office first and

look at the computer. I'll catch up with you.” He nodded and walked off in the direction of the engine shed. A few minutes earlier the cops had got in their car and driven up there.

The office was a room in the old Commonwealth Bank that housed the Information Centre, Gift Shop and Archives collection. The old weatherboard bank had been moved to the Museum years ago and now stood near the entry, beside the car park. I went up the steps and in the back door.

Lucy was at her desk and Simon, the Society's Treasurer, was sitting at the other doing some paperwork. He lifted his head and peered at me from over the top of his specs. I wasn't real fussed about Simon. He was an accountant like my father and, like Dad, he resented being disturbed when he was working with his precious figures. Still, from what I picked up by listening to the others, he was a good treasurer, even if he was tightfisted when it came to purchasing new exhibits for the Museum. They reckoned that it was because of him that the Museum had recently got a Government grant to buy a new rider mower, so I guessed he was okay.

“Oh, Tip. Good on you,” said Lucy. “Come around here and I'll show you what the problem is.” I went behind Simon and stood next to Lucy as she clicked on things on her screen. She was a pretty girl and I felt a bit embarrassed being so close to her. She was going out with Ted, a young bloke who worked in the blacksmith's shop. I'd sometimes operated the blower for him when he was heating steel in the forge, making it nearly white hot so he could shape it on the anvil.

It didn't take long to fix Lucy's problem. It was no big deal but she called me a genius for working it out. I left the Bank and hurried up to the engine shed, hoping the cops were still doing the fingerprinting.

There was no sign of the cops or their car. I looked around and found Ronnie out near the back fence, walking slowly and

staring at the ground. Zac was nosing around in the trees out past the fence. I walked over to Ronnie. "Where's the cops?"

He looked up. "Ah, they just dusted a few things with powder then nicked off. They said the bloke must've been wearing gloves. You could tell they reckon it's a waste of time looking for some old bits of junk — that's what the Sarge called it. You should have heard the way they were joking about it. I reckon we could do a better job than them. At least I'm looking for tracks; they didn't even bother. Gee they made me mad."

"So old Beer Belly isn't going to strain himself, huh?" I said. "See anything?"

He shook his head. "You'd think he'd leave some sort of tracks in all this dust."

As I looked around I noticed a very rusty old engine sitting on the ground behind the shed. I hadn't seen it before. "What's that?" I asked. "It's new... I mean new here, isn't it?"

"Yair," he replied. "A McDonald. We bought it from the scrappie a few days ago. He was going to smash it up and sell it to the Chinese for scrap iron. I don't know how people can do things like that."

I'd heard about the scrap merchant before. I said, "Is he the bloke you reckon gets stuff for nothing then turns round and sells it to the Museum for a fortune?"

"That's him. Charlie Lobegeier. Dad almost didn't get that engine it was so pricey. Simon wouldn't okay him spending the dough so Dad ended up forking out a fair bit of his own money. You should have heard the blue he had with Mum over it. But he reckoned he couldn't sleep at night, thinking about something like that being turned into Toyotas. It's one of the real early ones, a D Type. Not many left, Dad says."

I knew Ronnie's family didn't have a lot of spare cash. The Council didn't pay them much as caretakers, and they only managed to survive on some sort of a pension Virgil got from a

car smash he'd had years ago, when his leg was broken. "Mister Lobegeier sounds like a bit of a rat," I said. "Where have you looked so far?" He showed me, so I went in the opposite direction, walking slowly and studying the ground for traces of anything like footprints. I'd gone past the back of the shed and was approaching the side boundary when something caught my eye. It wasn't a footprint. I called out to Ronnie, "Hey, come here. Look at this."

He hurried over and looked down at what I was pointing at — a blurred pattern of curved lines in the dust. "By gee, Tip," Ronnie said in a low voice, "It's like the ground's been swept with something. He's covered his tracks."

"Let's get the cops back here," I said, looking around. "Look, there's more."

"I don't reckon the cops would be bothered," he said. "They'd probably say we did this." We followed the sweeping pattern over to the fence while he was talking.

I lifted one of the wires to go through the fence but saw that Ronnie was hesitant. "Let's go," I said. "He can't have swept his tracks all the way. We'll pick them up somewhere."

Ronnie looked back towards the Museum. "I'm not allowed in there," he said.

"Huh?" This was news to me. "Why not?"

"The old man and the Doolans don't get on. They had a blue a few years back over a Sunshine harvester."

"But..." I was surprised. Ronnie was usually game for anything. "We've got to get the magnetos back, haven't we? It looks like these Doolans must be the ones who took them. I bet the tracks go right to their house."

Ronnie shook his head. "I don't think so. They're a couple of old bachelors who go to church every Sunday. They wouldn't do something like that. Them and Dad used to be mates until they had the bust-up. No, it'd be someone else coming through their

property. It wouldn't be hard, 'specially at night."

"Well, the tracks will tell us that."

A slow smile appeared on Ronnie's face. "Know something? My parents are going to town after lunch."

I grinned. "What they don't know won't hurt 'em."

"Exactly."

"We could take the Bantam," I suggested. It was an old motorbike we sometimes used for racing around the cultivation paddock.

"Too noisy," Ronnie said. "The Doolans are old but not deaf."

"The golf buggy then?" It was electric, and silent. Virgil sometimes used it when he had a lot of walking to do.

"Gee, Tip. If the old man finds out I've gone into the Doolans — *and* on his buggy. Whew!"