

TALARA

PROLOGUE

This is a true story and it is a tale which ought to be told.

Not only is it a true story but it is in fact a slice of little known and perhaps never before recorded history about the birth of a city and the beginning of the oil industry in South America and I am the only person in the whole world who can tell this particular story which is mostly my grandmother's story.

In the years between 1912 and early 1917 my grandparents lived in Peru at a place called TALARA (Ta-lah-ra) a very romantic sounding name for a quite fearsome place. First let me tell you how I came to write this book as that is also quite a story.....

Once upon a time a long time ago when I was a little girl (I am now pushing 80)I would listen for hours as my beloved Granny would tell me stories of her time in South America. I would sit on her knee – and this was no easy task as she had an enormous bosom which took up most of the room, but I was totally entranced with these stories which she told me over and over and over again. When she was in her late 80's she went blind and deaf and at this stage she lived completely in the past and these stories were once again aired over and over again until they were positively etched into my memory word for word. When I was 12 Granny gave me a box containing photographs, old newspapers, memorabilia and a partial journal she had written in longhand on loose sheets of pad paper. She said "I am no good at this but you are good at essays so perhaps one day you will write my story" I replied "Yes Granny, perhaps I will". So the box was put away and I grew up, went to work, got engaged and married and had

a couple of children. During this time I moved about a good deal but wherever I went – THE BOX WENT WITH ME. When I was in my thirties I had settled in Rotorua and had a small job as Secretary/Treasurer of a Sporting Club and this job came with a typewriter. “Oh good” I thought “Now I can get on with Granny’s story”. So I got the box out of a cupboard and sat down to read through her journal. This was very hard going as my granny was no author ,but there were facts and details which I transferred to another sheet of paper and then I started to type. I did a few pages and then read it over and screwed it up. After a couple of attempts I settled on a format which I thought would work so over the next few months (In between looking after two toddlers) I managed to write an Author’s Forward , a Prologue and a chapter or two.

Then my life changed dramatically and I got divorced and shifted first house and then city. I moved from Rotorua to Hamilton and then after a while I moved to Auckland but always –THE BOX WENT WITH ME. I was now in my forties and had a friend who belonged to a Writer’s Club. She said “Why don’t you take what you have written to the Club and see what they say” .So I did and was told “Well this is quite good stuff but you cannot do it like that You have written as an Autobiography – You can’t do that as it is not your story, you must do it as a Biography”. Well I didn’t see why not but I tried and found that it did not flow at all well so I put it back in the box and forgot about it for a few years. During this time I remarried and eventually retired to our beach house at Whangamata. AND THE BOX WENT WITH ME.

I was now in my fifties and once again got a job which came with a typewriter – this time as secretary/Treasurer to the local St.John Ambulance.I got the box out again and read over what I had written and over the next few months wrote a few more chapters- then I got very busy and became a large frog in a small puddle as I was involved in just about everything in Whangamata. I played golf and bowls, cards and mahjong, was treasurer of all sorts of things and had no time at all to think of The Book.

Now in my sixties I now had another upheaval in my life – my husband became violent and hit me – well I was not going to stand for that so reluctantly had to once again start from scratch. We were divorced , our house was sold and I moved into rented properties.- and of course THE BOX WENT WITH ME. I continued with all my activities in Whangamata and then I had a Paranormal Experience which was to change my life again.

One day I was attending the funeral of a fellow golfer and after the graveside ceremony I was at the back of the cemetery, waiting for the car park to clear when suddenly I felt a terrific push in my back so much that I took a step forward and looked back to say “quit pushing” but there was no-one there and then a voice in my head said “Go and stand by Roy” and then I felt a tingling from my fingers up to my elbow and the voice said “Go and put your hand in Roy’s” I was amazed but I did not do it as I just did not know Roy Stephen well enough – he was a mere acquaintance and he was standing by his wife’s grave. However I do feel that I was meant to take notice. A few weeks later I was drawn in the same golf team as Roy and we got talking. I told him about my book and he said he would like to read it so of course I showed it to him. He said “ You know this is really quite good BUT you can’t do it like that – you have written it single spacing on foolscap paper – if you want to send it to a Publisher then you must write it double spacing on A4 – why don’t you come over and put it on my computer?”.

“Oh No” I said “I don’t know anything about computers- don’t want to know”.

“Come on “he said “You are a good typist and will have no trouble – I will set it up for you” . So with some trepidation I had a go and of course found it a Piece of Cake. You don’t have to return the carriage after every line (just keep typing) if you make a mistake you do not have to rub it out, just fix it ,you can put a bit in or take a bit out and what is more the machine tells you if the spelling is wrong!! I was hooked and over the

next few months I retyped all that I had written and another couple of chapters as well- I was now up to chapter 7. All this time Roy and I were becoming closer although not by any means a couple but we did enjoy each other's company and found we had a good deal in common.

Then disaster struck.....Someone made Roy an offer which he could not refuse and his house was sold quite quickly. He moved into a Retirement Village at Mount Maunganui and of course he took his computer (and my book) with him.

After a very short time we found that we missed each other terribly (absence definitely did make our hearts grow fonder) and after a lot of phone calls and several visits I decided to move to Tauranga. As well as Roy, my daughter and all my grandchildren were there as well as a schoolfriend from primary days so once again I leapt off into the unknown and started again. Of course THE BOX WENT WITH ME (now containing all that I had written as I had printed it out in case the computer did not like being shifted). We actually changed computers a few times and each time I said "Don't lose the Book".

Roy and I now definitely became a couple although we did not marry for some time but I did not do any more to the book for a couple of years but I did try to find someone who might be interested in taking THE BOX off my hands. I could not bring myself to throw it away as I felt it must be of interest to someone. I wrote to the Spanish Consul and the Mayor of Talara in both English and Spanish which a friend had translated for me but got no replies so forgot about it again. Later a lady came to live in the village- she was a published writer herself and used to teach writing at a College. I showed her the book and she said 'This is really quite good BUT ----- you have started the story at the wrong place. I suggest you start further along and then flash back to where you have originally started". I did actually do what she said and it was much better that way.

Then my beloved Roy (it was third time lucky for me) contracted Cancer and the next couple of years passed in a blur of Doctors and Specialists, treatments, medications and appointments and finally Hospital, Hospice and in May 2009 my wonderful husband died- I was devastated.

And Now we come to this year. In April 2010 it was coming up to the anniversary of Roy's death and I was in a very strange frame of mind. Did not know what to do, could see no future and was all upset (completely discombobulated – that's a very good word) and said to myself " What on earth should I do". The voice in my head spoke again (I do feel that I am guided and steered by a higher Power) and it said "Why don't you finish that darned book"

So I did and on April 27th 2010 I finally wrote "THE END" As I am now in my late seventies this will be my only book – I would not have time to do another one at this rate.

Even as a child I thought to myself "This would make a great book". I still think so and now with grandchildren of my own and a little time on my hands I feel that it must be done before the memories fade. Incidentally I also think this story would make a great Cinemascope, Widescreen, Blockbuster movie containing as it does all the elements.....It is a great love story, there is drama and adventure – even some violence and moments of complete farce.

This then is my Grandmother's story about her great adventure between the years of 1912-1917 at a time in which women did not expect to have adventures. This is the time of long skirts and high button boots.. Well bred and genteel ladies just did not sail off to the other side of the world with a toddler in tow..

The story is taken from my grandmother's journal, the old newspapers and of course the stories she told me with a little bit of imagination to fill in the gaps.

Any Historical and Geographical details are taken from the World Book Encyclopaedia or googled from the Internet.

I write more fluently in the first person so for the purposes of this book I shall be be my grandmother and hope that I can do justice to this wonderful story.....

Susannah Elizabeth Tilbey (called Susan)

born in England on 22nd January 1880 was a fragile child. Doctors of the day shook their heads and said "Poor Susan - this child will not make old bones "Later at age six when she fell fully clothed into a pond and contracted pneumonia it was the general consensus of opinion that "Poor Susan is not long for this world"

However Susan Tilbey then Foster and finally Hart was a lot tougher than she looked and lived a full and active life, in the process surviving many minor and major illnesses, including T.B. in the days when it was known as Consumption and was nearly always fatal; she also contracted bad Arthritis and was told that she would be in a wheelchair by the time she was forty- "That'll be the day "said my Granny (Everyone said she had a very stubborn chin and in fact generally did what she decided). She took every remedy that anyone ever said was good for Arthritis including living on nothing else but grapes for a whole six months. I don't know if that was what did the

trick but she was still on her feet at ninety (still had arthritis and used to wear little woolly hats on her knees) .She was an indomitable lady who did things like getting up a ladder and painting the roof of her house when she was in her late sixties (arthritic knees and all) After that she set to and reupholstered her lounge suite in a very professional manner. She finally died after a stroke at the age of 90 in Hamilton New Zealand where she had lived for many years with her son Jack, now widowed.

She had a happy and unremarkable childhood about which I know very little in the way of details but this book is not really about that so I will take up her story when Granny was in her early thirties

CHAPTER ONE

THE BIG DECISION

One fateful day in 1912 my whole life changed forever when my husband Alf came home from work in a high old state of excitement. His eyes were shining and his whole body was quivering with emotion; I waited while he obviously looked for the right words to tell me something momentous..... Finally he burst out

“Susan darling, how would you like to go to Peru to live, that is in South America”

“ I know where Peru is alright Alf, but why on earth would you or anyone else for that matter actually want to go there to live? From what I have heard it is an awful place”

“ Today the Boss called me into his office and I thought I must have done something wrong, but no he wanted to offer me another job within the company. I have told you before I think, that the London and Pacific Petroleum Company where I work has been prospecting for oil in South America for about 25 years. They were always pretty sure that there was some there as they had found Inca pots lined with pitch which is what you get when oil is boiled - well now they have found some and quite a significant strike at that I believe. I have been offered the job of providing a Port and Oil Refinery at a place called Talara, which is the closest point on the coast with deep water to Negritos, the place where the oil has been found. They have offered me more money than I have had in my whole life Susan, and the contract would only be for four years which is not too great an amount in a lifetime. It would mean that we would be able to give the boys the best of educations and that we would be set for life. What do you say Susan?”

“Well love, I can see that you are very excited at the prospect so perhaps you had better tell me a bit more about this Talara place before I can make any

decision. For a start would there be any school there for Jack who is doing quite well with his studies and what sort of accommodation is there for us ?

“ This is where it gets a bit tricky Susan dear, there are no schools in Talara, no shops, no roads in fact there is not very much of anything there and the first thing is that Jack would have to stay behind in England with your Mother, but you could bring Albert with you as he is not due to start school for about four years and that is about the exact time that we would have to spend in South America. About the house, well I would have to go out ahead of you and actually supervise the building of our home .I have to say that could be a bit of a problem too as there have been no houses built in Talara since the first five were constructed 25 years ago to house the oil prospectors and of course all materials and workmen will have to be brought in from Lima”.

“ Lima - now that is a place I have heard of and quite a sizeable city I believe, will we be close to that”

“Comparatively close as the crow flies but not so that you would be able to do the shopping there I am afraid. Oh Susan do come.....it will be a real adventure and a chance which would never come my way again!!”

“ Oh I don't know Alf. I have never been away from England before and I don't like the thought of leaving Jack and my family and friends and leaping off into the unknown into what sounds to me to be a terribly out of the way and primitive place, I don't know if I would enjoy that at all.”

He looked very crestfallen when I said this and I wondered if I could be making a mistake if I said “No”- I love my Alf very much indeed and would do anything to please him but this was a very big step to take. He must have seen that I was wrestling with the prospect of a very different lifestyle so left me alone for a while and then finally he blurted out.....

“Come on Susan love, where is your sense of adventure? Don't you have a wish to visit far away places and see strange and new things?”

Far away places and strange things.....Far away places and strange things.....

In an instant I was back 12 years to the last time I had heard these words.....

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My best friend Clara and I were quite excited as we strolled down towards the village green where the Fair was to be held. In 1900 entertainment was pretty limited and the occasion of the Annual Village Fair was a matter of some importance and also an opportunity for us to wear our new clothes. We thought ourselves very smart in our long black skirts with shirtwaister blouses in candy stripes - mine red and white and Clara's blue and white-topped by boater hats with ribbons to match our blouses and of course our high button boots and white cotton gloves without which nice young ladies were never to be seen.

We had decided earlier that we would do the serious part of the fair first so we ambled about the green admiring the animals wearing the best of kind ribbons and wandered into the tent where the displays of cooking, sewing and crafts were to be found as well as some enormous marrows and other vegetables, with which our mothers had gained placings. After a while we tired of that and went outside to where the sideshows and stalls had been set up. We had of course, left the best part to last.

We wandered about doing a little mild flirting and trying our hands at a few of the sideshows - Clara very nearly won a crystal vase at the Hoopla but the ring teetered and then settled back at the very last minute. Next we gave Billy Jenkins a ducking in the ducking pool and hoped the poor boy did not get a chill at being thrown into the water so many times. After doing our best to win a prize at the coconut shies and failing miserably we were just wandering about the grounds enjoying the clowns and acrobats, chatting to friends and generally having a very nice time when Clara exclaimed.....

“Oh look Susan, there is a new stall this year - A Real Live Gypsy Fortune Teller - lets go and have our fortunes told”

“ I don't believe in all that Mumbo Jumbo, so I'll just wait here”

“Well I am jolly well going to see what she has to say “ and with this Clara ducked into the small tent decorated with signs of the Zodiac leaving me watching the coconut shies. After about a quarter of an hour she came out with a very bemused expression on her face and said

“That gypsy seems to know what she is talking about as she told me things I don't see how she could have guessed and I do hope the lovely future she has predicted for me will come true - you really ought to try her, Susan”

“Well it really is against my better judgement but I suppose I had better keep you quiet” so I in turn lifted the tent flap and slipped inside the fortune tellers domain. As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I became aware of a very authentic looking gypsy woman in dirndl skirt and peasant blouse, lots of jangly bangles, topped with a scarf around her head and dangly earrings .She chuckled as I came close.....

“Aha, young lady, I can see that you do not believe in gypsies so I shall have to prove to you that I really can foretell the future. First, cross my palm with silver” so I dropped a threepence into a hand which was none too clean and settled back not expecting to believe a word of it. The gypsy stared into the crystal ball on a small table in front of her and began...

“My goodness, young lady I see a wonderful future for you. One such as it has seldom been my privilege to see - you will travel to far off lands and see strange sights which few other people have ever seen”.

Well I thought “ that's a load of rubbish for a start - wherever would I go and in any case there is no way that I would leave my family and friends. However,I sat up smartly as the woman continued.....

“ You have recently met a man with dark hair, sparkling blue eyes and a wicked sense of humour. His name begins with the letter A - you will marry this man and you will share a life of adventure with him”

“Oh no I won't” I burst out “We fight too much”.

“Nevertheless” continued the gypsy “ You will marry this man and you will be a proper mother.”

“And pray what other sort is there?” She must have thought me very rude but she continued.....

“I mean that you will bear your husband three sons and you will have a happy life for many years”.

At this point her face clouded and she said quickly.....

“The glass is fading and that is all that I can tell you.”

I gave her a quick thank you and went out to where Clara was waiting.

“ Whatever did she say to you Susan, you have a very funny look on your face”

“ She described Alf Foster exactly and said that I would marry him. How could she possibly know about Alf ? She even had his initial right!! . Also she said that I would travel overseas with him, what do you think of that?”

“Well, you are going to marry him, aren't you. Has he asked you yet?”

“Actually, Clara, at this moment I am not at all sure that I will ever speak to Alf again, let alone marry the man.”

“Oh dear, have you two had one of your monumental rows again?”

“Worse than that .Last Friday was my birthday and Alf had promised to take me shopping for that lovely little painting in the village shop window. When it came to 7 o'clock I was getting upset and thought that he had forgotten but shortly after that he arrived and.....he was filthy dirty with one arm hanging out of his jacket and he had a black eye!!!. I thought that he must have been fighting which would not have surprised me but according to Alf he had been a bit late as usual and had taken a shortcut through some backyards where he had fallen over a dustbin in the dark and

hurt himself .After making sure that he wasn't badly damaged I said "But what about my present?"

"Alright love" he said" Off we go to get your birthday gift"

I was aghast "Alf Foster if you think I am going to be seen with you looking like a tramp, you are much mistaken"

"Darling Susan" he said "You must learn to take me as I am and I am not going shopping on my own so if you will not come with me now then I am afraid you will have to miss out on your present"

"I would not go with him and he would not go without me, so I did not get the present that I had really set my heart on. No, I am not at all sure that I shall ever speak to him ever again."

"Oh but Susan, he is such a lovely man and he loves you so much."

"Doesn't sound as if he loves me very much to treat me like that."

"Come on Susan, where is your sense of humour - at least life would never be dull with a man like Alf."

"No and it might not be a very secure affair either. Let me tell you what he did last week

Now we have been courting for quite a few months now and sometimes Alf would be quite late home which I imagine made him a bit on the tired side. You know he has to walk along the bridle path and cross over that bridge which swings up to let the barges along the river, to get to work Welllll.....

When he is late he has to sign in the attendance book and give his reason for being late. It has been happening quite a lot lately and in the book Alf had written

Bridge Swung

Bridge Swung

Bridge Swung

B/S

B/S

Bridge Swung

B/S

B/S

B/S

After a couple of weeks the Boss called him into the office and said to him

“Now see here Alf Foster, you are being late an awful lot lately and I don’t imagine that this bridge of yours is swung every day?”

“ Well No.o.o.o” said Alf ‘You see B/S does not always stand for Bridge Swung sometimes it stands for Bit Sleepy.’ And he got away with it. What would you do with a man like that?”

“ Well Susan, if I were you I would grab him quick, I think he is lovely and if you don’t want him then I shall see if he will have me instead.”

After much persuasion I did eventually forgive Alf and as predicted by the gypsy we were married on a lovely spring day in 1902. On my wedding day I was very slim having only an 18 inch waist. As we stood together after the ceremony Alf put his two big hands about my waist and said “There you are darling, I can hold you in the palm of my hand and I swear I will live and protect you as long as I live”. How romantic!!

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For the next 9 years we lived happily and pleasantly during the course of which time I duly produced three sons as predicted by the gypsy - Alf Junior (called Happy Jack), Freddy and then finally Albert. The only real sorrow was the loss of Freddy at the age of five from a diphtheric throat. The gypsy did not say anything about that but I did wonder at the cloud that passed over her face as she told me about my future family

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At this point Alf waggled his fingers in front of my face and said “Hey Susan what are you thinking about, you are a mile away?”

“I am thinking about far away places and strange things to see. Do you remember me telling you about a gypsy who said I would marry you before I was sure about that myself? This same gypsy told me that with you I would travel to far off lands and see some pretty strange sights. It seems as if she may have been right after all.”

“ Óh good. then you will come with me to South America.”

“Let’s say it is not a definite No, just at this moment, but I will want to know a lot more about it before I say Yes for sure.”

“ What I do for a living my love, is likely to be very important on a world scale quite soon.

The Automobile and Aeroplane industries are still in their infancy but the Boss and I were talking about this and we believe that in the not too distant future that everyone will have their own car and they will be a great deal more sophisticated than at present; great planes will fly hundreds of passengers from place to place. There is also no doubt in my mind that ships and trains will also change from messy coal firing to diesel engines. Our oil industry is going to be vital to all forms of transport and I find it quite exciting to be in at the very beginning of what is obviously going to be a very challenging time. I feel that the chance offered to me now is something I would very much like to do and something which I know I will regret if I turn it down, but if you will not go with me then I am not too sure that all the money and advantages would be worth it. Four years would be a long time away from my loved ones.”

“I can see you are really in earnest about this Love, and I feel it would be wrong of me to stand in your way. As you said it is a wonderful opportunity, one which we will probably never receive again and if I discourage you then I think you may resent it and may not forgive me for denying you this chance. I think Alf, that you had better tell your Boss that you have decided to take the offer and then we can make definite plans.”

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It was only a few weeks later that Alf boarded the ship to take him to South America-

Two other men from the firm went with him and a load of equipment .The boys and I tearfully waved him good-bye. I had promised to follow later when he was established in Talara and a house had been built to accommodate us but as I continued to wave I turned to my father and said "I have promised to follow him to South America, but that is the biggest lie I have ever told- I am sure that I would never stand the terrible journey, but he really wanted to go and I would not want to stand in his way." I meant it too, but that was before I got The Letter.

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Ships in 1912 were not at all like the floating palaces they later became and with the smell of coal smoke plus the pitching and tossing of the vessel Alf was not feeling at all well. The Bay of Biscay is a notoriously rough stretch of water and by the time it was reached Alf was feeling very sorry for himself indeed so sat down at the desk to write the first of many letters to me.....

He wrote " My Dearest Darling Susan, I have only been away from you for a few hours and already I am missing you dreadfully. How am I going to bear even six months without you, it seems like forever to be without your warmth and love. I love you Susan, with all my heart - you were the only girl for me from the moment we met and my heart is heavy that it will be so long before I see you again. Each day will seem an eternity without you. Please write soon and help these long days pass for me.

Love you for ever, Alf.

When I received this letter I cried for some time and then went to see my dear friend Clara and gave her the letter to read.

“ I can’t read this” she cried “It’s a love letter”.

“Yes it is isn’t it?” - the first he has ever written to me and I am afraid Clara it is just too much for me. I told my Dad that I would not go to South America but after that letter I am going to have to follow my darling to Peru or to anywhere else in the world he wants to go. Life just is not worth much without him.”

“ Golly Susan, do you realise the gipsy was right after all - you are going to travel to foreign lands and no doubt you will see many strange sights.”

“Yes, I had already thought of that and now I must make plans. I can’t take Jack with me and that will break my heart but I must leave him with Mother so that he can be properly educated - there are no schools in Talara. Albert is still a baby and will not need to go to school until we return, so I shall take him with me. Goodness knows how I am going to be able to cope in a foreign land, but my mind is made up and I must go where my Alf is.”

I wrote to him that very day.....

My Darling Alf,

I was very pleased to hear from you after such a short time but it broke my heart to hear that you were so unhappy.

I have to say that I was still very undecided about whether to follow you to South America but your letter has finally made my mind up and I have decided that I cannot live without you either so as soon as ever you can get our new home built then I will follow you to Peru or to anywhere else you want to go. My place is with you and I cannot wait for the months to pass until I have your strong arms around me again.

Love you forever,

Susan.

Another couple of months passed and then I got another letter:

Darling Susan,

I have now arrived in Talara and have to say that I am appalled – there is absolutely nothing here but a few dilapidated fishermen's huts – the place is a desert and I am not too sure if I can manage – this is a monumental task and what is more I do not know if I can even ask you to come to such a terrible place.- but I know that with you at my side I can accomplish great things- without you I am nothing.

The men and I are being accommodated in the old hostel built for the oil prospectors and one of the wives is supplying us with meals – pretty ordinary and with fish every night – I look forward to some of your excellent meals again – you are a very good cook

Please write to me often to keep me going – I am afraid the mails will be a bit erratic as at the moment they will have to be sent to Lima Post Office and brought around when there is a small coastal boat coming this way. The trouble is darling, that without a wharf only small boats can get into Talara and even then they have to go up the river a bit to a place where they can get close to land so I must hurry to get the wharf built. My first task of course is our house – I have chosen a site on a hill a bit higher up so that at least you will get a sea breeze so that it might not be too hot for you. I have been to Lima and engaged builders to get on with our house and they are due to arrive in a couple of weeks. To get the materials up to the site they will have to bring a couple of horses with them (of course they will also be needed to bring logs down from the hills as these will be needed for pilings for the wharf.) Oh dear, my love, everything is so difficult here. It sounds very easy “Bring a couple of horses” but of course horses need to be fed and there is not a single blade of grass in Talara so they will also have to bring sacks of oats and chaff as well. Then a secure shed will have to be made to store the food as there are some rather nasty big rats here!!

Hope this will not put you off but Susan darling I need you so, please come.

All my love,ALF

My dearest love Alf,

Well from the photo you sent I can see that Talara is not much of a place but no matter what it is like I am coming to be with you. My place is beside my husband and I cannot wait for our new home to be finished.

Please write soon and tell me what I must bring with me. We are very lucky as I know a young couple who are to be married and they want to rent the house fully furnished (they are studying and hope to travel in a few years so they do not want to have to buy anything just now) . That means that I will have to buy new things to bring with me – this could cost quite a lot I fear.

Well two months have already gone by so that means only another four until I am with you – it cannot come soon enough as I am just so lonely without you and I hate sleeping in our big bed by myself. Sometimes I let the boys in with me just for company but that is not too good a habit for them to get into.

Jack does not seem too concerned about staying with his grandparents and they of course will be glad to have him – he has such a sunny nature but I am afraid Albert is very unhappy and keeps calling for “Dada” so I just tell him we will see you soon.

Hoping that the time will not pass too slowly.

All my love,

SUSAN

My Love,

I was overjoyed to get your letter and I can now advise that some progress has been made – the carpenters have the framework up for our house and on their next trip they will be bringing the roofing materials with them. There is no shortage of labour here as news has travelled very quickly that things are happening in Talara and that there will be work for many and they will even get paid !! This is a very Catholic country and they have big families so it is very important for the men be able to support them all.

I am still struggling with the local language- I did have a slight smattering of Spanish before I left England but the local brand is quite different and I must master it if I am to be able to communicate with the workmen.

Now about what you should bring – well I have arranged with the builders that on their last trip they should bring beds with mattresses, pillows and blankets, tables and chairs And a bath but everything else you must bring with you. One thing – do not forget to bring several good oil lamps as these may not be available here. You do not have to worry about oil though as we will be able to get that – there are little ships that bring supplies this way but not on a terribly regular basis I am afraid. As you said this could cost quite a lot so the firm has arranged to transfer funds into my bank account so that you can buy whatever you need. This will take a good deal of thinking about darling, as you will have to allow for the fact that there are no shops at all here and that you must allow for four years although I imagine some things will be available before that long.

So my love have a good old shopping spree as it will have to last you a long time

Missing you terribly and counting the days until you are with me again.

All my love,

ALF

Then another letter received the same day so I read them in date order.

Darling Susan,

Things are now moving along although this is going to be a long process – this week I have been up into the hills behind Talara to find trees that will be suitable and then get some native woodsmen to fell them for me and cut them to the right lengths. It was quite a climb and I must say that I am getting very fit out here and developing impressive muscles. I am also very tanned as the sun is very hot in the daytime. With my swarthy skin I am quite alright but I must warn you that you must bring shady hats for you and Albert who both have very fair English skins. I hope you recognise the new Alf and that you love him just as much.

Tomorrow I am sending the horses up to drag the logs out of the forest and down the hill and then I will really be getting started. I do hope that I can live up to my Boss's expectations but this really is a very big job for one man.

One thing about all this activity is that by night time (and we work long hours) I am tired right out and I fall asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow so I do not have time to think how lonely it is to sleep alone.

Love you always

ALF

Dearest Darling Alf,

You need not worry about me not knowing you or loving you as much. I could not love you more if I tried and I am looking forward to seeing the bronzed and beautiful new Alf.

I have started to amass the things which I need and have already got the spare room just about full – there are so many things to think about so I have just decided to go

from room to room and make a list of things for each room but I have to say it is quite fun going into shops and ordering things in bulk. Please thank your Boss from me for making the funds available. I am certainly going to have a shopping spree of monumental proportions.

Well it is now only three months until I see you again and I am counting the days

All my love Susan.

Next month I got another letter – they were a precious link between us but not the same as being together.

Darling Susan,

Well it will not be too long before you arrive and I am pretty sure that the house will be finished before you get here. It is rather slow as the builders have to bring all the materials from Lima and only so much can be bought at one time as they can only bring the small boats that can land here and of course they all want to go home to their families at the week-ends but it is definitely beginning to look like a house now – will be lovely to live in a house again as I am getting rather tired of the cramped quarters at the hostel.

The wharf is also making progress as all the timber has now been felled and brought down to the flat. The only trouble is that without the wharf the larger ships just cannot land so we have to make do with ropes and pulleys to get the logs into place and that is very slow and very hard work so have had to employ a lot more of the natives.

Once the wharf is finished we will be able to land a crane and some rails and motors but just have to live through this initial stage. The sooner it is finished the better.

Only two months now – hurry up to me my love.

Yours forever

ALF.

Darling Alf,

Well it will not be long now before we are together again – I cannot wait until I have your arms around me – I have been so lonely but now I am getting quite excited.

I hope that I am going to like South America but it does not matter whether I like it or not but it will not matter because I will be with you again.

I have started on getting all the supplies but must leave most of it for another few weeks as they will take up so much room.

The spare bedroom is already full and I have not yet really got started.

The house sounds nice and I look forward to making it into a home for my family.

Jack is quite looking forward to staying with his grandparents as they will spoil him.

See you soon love, Your SUSAN ALWAYS.

CHAPTER TWO

COUNTDOWN

Well now that I had the go ahead with finances I sat down to make a list of all the things that I would need to take with me – four years is a very long time to do the shopping for so I sat down with a pad and decided what I must take.

For a start the very first thing I would need would be my trusty treadle Singer Sewing machine which I could see would be getting a lot of use. Of course I would need a good supply of machine needles and also lots of different sized ordinary sewing needles and pins plus boxes of different coloured cottons, buttons, domes and fasteners and then materials. Don't forget scissors (pinking shears, ordinary scissors of various sizes plus nail scissors and toenail clippers) I was used to just buying a length of cloth from the drapers but this time I needed bolts of cloth – all sorts and lots of them. I would need curtain materials as I was determined that although I was going to a primitive place I was going to make a proper home for my family. Oh curtains means curtain rods and curtain rings. I can see that one thing is going to lead to another. I also needed materials for shirts and pyjamas then I would want bombazine for my skirts and poplin for my blouses plus stuff to make little trousers for Albert. I would not have to worry about too much for Alf as he would be mostly wearing work overalls and boots which would be provided by London & Pacific Petroleum co. While on the subject of clothing – I would need shoes – mine would not be too much trouble as several sets of button boots and a few soft indoor shoes would suffice but Albert – well he was going to grow from a baby into a sturdy little boy and his feet would change quite a lot in that time so I needed a whole range of shoes and socks of course also I would need a fair few little shirts of various sizes for him.

And as Alf had advised I would need lots of hats in different sizes also I had better take lots of underwear for us all. I also sorted through all the wardrobes and drawers, and sorted out the clothes that we had, knowing that I had to leave all the cupboards and drawers completely empty for the tenants coming into my house. Most of the clothes I had selected went straight into trunks and I gave a lot to charity. Everything else would have to be crated by the shipping company- once I had assembled it all.

Now first the kitchen;-

Well for a start I would need a full set of pots and pans, crockery , cutlery and utensils (do not forget tin openers, egg beaters and fish slices) . Actually this would be a bit of a bonus as our wedding present china and pots were starting to show considerable signs of wear. I was really starting out again so it would be a luxury to have all new things again. I felt like a bride getting her glory box ready!!.

Now what else – oh yes a clock ,brush and shovel, brooms and most of all I must not forget my spice rack and essences – from what Alf has said I will need all the help I can get to supply my family with tasty and nourishing meals.

Next the Washhouse:

I would need buckets and scrubbing brushes. All manner of cleaning materials – must not forget packets and packets of sunlight soap and sandsoap. Another thing I must take a few old towels or there would be no cleaning cloths. Also on the list went some wire for a clothes line (I imagined there would be some wood for posts and a prop) and of course a large supply of pegs. Oh don't forget the iron – horrible heavy things flatirons, but I was determined not to let my standards down. I had better not forget my little axe as kindling wood would be needed.

Now the Parlour-

Well I would not need too much from here as Alf was getting furniture from Lima but I would need a few mats for the floor and pictures for the wall and of course family

photos as I knew I would miss Jack and my whole family very much. Perhaps a few precious ornaments too (anything very special I would leave with my mother) and don't forget the lamps Alf had requested, Well if we had lamps I suppose I had better take a supply of candles (and holders) in case the oil ran out at any stage. Oh, and matches boxes and boxes of them as the stove would need to be lit every day. .

Lastly the bedrooms – well once again not too much needed here but a must would be a washstand with bowl and ewer - oh and of course two chamber pots (a small one for Albert and a larger one for Alf and me) as I am sure we would not be wanting to go outside to the Privy in the middle of the night. Better take a couple of each in case of breakage. Need another couple of mirrors too. Don't forget toothbrushes and hairbrushes and combs. Oh dear one thing reminds me of something else and the list grows daily.

Now what else :-

Oh yes I must certainly take an extensive medical kit with me as there would be no doctors, nurses or chemists in Talara. I would get the chemist to make me a proper medical cabinet with everything we could possibly need.

Now, what about entertainment – well for a start lots of packs or cards and my Mah Jong set – then lots of books both for Alf and me and for Albert who would need colouring books and crayons, coloured pencils (whoops I nearly forgot a pencil sharpener) and lots of paper and a slate with slate pencils. For me I would need writing paper and pens (and ink) so that I could keep in contact with Jack and my mother.

Can see I would be doing a lot of writing.

I am sure there would be other things I would think of at the last minute but that would do to start with.

Now I received another letter from Alf.

Darling Susan,

Well this will be my last letter as the mails are so slow that you would be here before another letter had time to arrive.

I have checked with the shipping company to see what date you would be arriving and I will be able to spare the time to come to meet you but I am afraid you will have to supervise the unloading of your trunks and crates at Colon and then on to the train across the Isthmus of Panama. At Balboa I am afraid you will once again have to supervise the re loading of all our goods and chattels onto a coastal boat, then I will meet you at Paita a town further down the coast. This as far as I can get transport at this time. I cannot wait but it is now only a few weeks and we will be together again. What a lot we have to talk about – but I don't expect to be doing too much talking on the first night !!

Please hurry,

Love, ALF

Another few weeks and everything was ready – the shipping company had collected all my considerable amount of luggage, Jack was duly installed with my mother and the time came for us all to say a sad farewell. I hugged them all and we all cried but as the "S.S. Aruba" sailed from Southampton I waved my hat in the air and said "South America, here we come and it will not be too long before I am with my beloved Alf again."

CHAPTER THREE

THE JOURNEY

The journey to Peru is not really the important part of this story except that as I sat on the deck and watched the wake stream out behind us I knew that every mile we travelled was one mile nearer to my darling. However there are a couple of incidents that I would like to share with you.....

Albert and I had never been on a ship of any kind so for the first few days we were very ill indeed. In fact I was so busy being sick that I simply could not deal with Albert as well so I rang for a Stewardess and was absolutely appalled when my ring was answered by a man - "I want a Stewardess to attend me" I wailed and upon being told that there were only Stewards on this ship and that they were fully trained to deal with any emergencies and could attend to my needs, I was very upset. I must have thrown such a screaming tantrum that the poor man backed out and said that he would see what could be done. I expect I behaved badly, but you must remember that I was a child of the Victorian era and we were pretty prudish about things. Why, in our parlour we even draped the table with a long baise cloth with tassels to the ground as table legs were thought to be somewhat indecent. The thought of a strange man in my bedroom was just too much for my Victorian soul. My conniptions bore fruit though, as the Steward soon came back with a lady from First Class. Her name was Esther and she was working her passage as a ladies maid while on her way to Trinidad to be married to a plantation owner she had never met. Her sister who lived there had arranged the marriage and Esther thought that anything would be better than being in service in England for the rest of her life. She helped me a great deal and when Albert and I got our sea legs, we became firm friends - a friendship that was to last . When we were finally able to go on deck we thoroughly enjoyed the voyage and Albert being the only child on board was well and truly spoilt and had the time of his life. Most of the

passengers were leaving family behind to go to other lands to seek their fortunes or escaping from England's cold and smoky climate for their health so they were already missing children and grandchildren and Albert, an engaging child with a cheeky grin, was only too happy to soak up all the attention available.

When we reached Trinidad I wept a little as I said goodbye to Esther, I hoped she would be happy -it was a big chance to take, marrying a completely unknown person - what if they did not like each other?

I had promised my parents that I would not go ashore at any foreign ports as it was said to be very a very dangerous thing to do so I settled down to watch the re-coaling of the ship but soon found that to be a big mistake. By the time I had changed Albert's clothes three times before 10 O'Clock (and just how can you keep small boys out of dirt which they seem to love so dearly?)I very gratefully accepted the Captain's offer of a ride to shore with him as he had to attend to official harbour duties. The coal had to be brought out on lighters and trundled aboard in loads on the heads of natives so was a very messy business indeed.

Albert and I loved having our feet on the ground again and we were entranced by the colours and smells of it all. After leaving home in the winter time it was a joy to see tropical birds and flowers.....they were actually perfumed so much it was a bit too scented for us. The people of course all spoke English as this was a British colony ; they all wore lightweight English clothing but their skins were very dark. We could communicate very well and I was enchanted with the commotion and colour of the markets where there was a wonderful selection of fruit. I loved bananas and enquired whether it would be possible to have 1/- (One shillings) worth sent out to the ship and was told that this would be no trouble at all. We went on a buggy ride to see the sights but it was very hot and we were quite glad to join the dinghy and be rowed back to the ship. As we arrived I saw another boat arriving - full to overflowing with great bunches of bananas.....

“Who is the lady who ordered the Bananas?” they called out.

“ Well I ordered one shillings worth “ I replied

“ Then these are for you” I was told

Seems you get a great deal more for a shilling in Trinidad than you do in England!.

Anyway, everyone on board had a taste and declared them the best ever.

I loved the tropical fruits and while we were ashore I enjoyed a drink straight from the coconut shell having first watched a native boy climb up and knock down the big shell.

Delicious when you are hot and tired.

Our next port of call was to have been Colombo but unfortunately there was some sort of epidemic raging there so only the people changing ship for Madeira and some other islands were allowed ashore .Hope they did not catch whatever it was, for by now they were all my friends. The ship also stopped at Cartagena which looked a very pretty place, but I did not go ashore there.

Next stop was Colon and I was finally in South America and getting closer to my Alf all the time but still had a way to go. First I had to make sure that all my trunks and cases were offloaded and transferred to the train which took about 7 hours to get to Panama. Oh, how I wished that they had finished that wretched Panama Canal which had taken years and years to get as far as it had. If it had been finished I would have been able to sail directly to Peru without all this unloading and loading to see to.

When we reached Panama at last, we went to a nice hotel but were quite tired out so went to bed early on a lovely comfortable bed which for a change, did not move. I slept like a baby and next morning decided to take the tour around to see the Canal workings - it seemed a pity not to check them out while I was here. Of course I had seen locks on the English rivers and understood the principle as explained by my Engineer husband, but the sheer size and amount of work astounded me. I was given a booklet about the place and learned that hundreds of years ago they had started talking about the possibility of a canal across the narrow isthmus of Panama. As early as 1517 Vasco de Balboa saw the possibility of a canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The port at the far end Balboa, is actually named after him. Work was

first started by a French company headed by Ferdinand de Lesseps who had directed construction of the Suez Canal. The Company began digging in 1882 and that would have been literally digging with shovels, but after digging out some 58 million cubic metres of earth, went bankrupt in 1889. After that the project went into abeyance for several years while all sorts of political manoeuvres were entered into but the United States of America was finally responsible for the construction of the canal at a cost of US\$ 380,000,000 (an absolute fortune especially as this was the early nineteenth hundreds) Work was begun in earnest in 1904 but it was such a fearsome stretch of country that the first two years were spent in clearing bush, draining swamps and cutting out large areas of grass where mosquitos swarmed. I wondered at the ugliness of large swampy areas and lakes covered in oil and was told this was to prevent the mosquitos from breeding. Thousands of men had died as a result of Malaria and Yellow Fever so this had been a very unhealthy place to be. It still did not look too great.

I marvelled at it all and was talking to a Supervisor while watching as the steam shovels and dredges worked to clear the hardest part - The Gaillard Cuthe explained to me that the hills consisted of soft volcanic material and that it was like digging into a pile of grain. As soon as a hole was dug it would fill up immediately. (Originally experts had estimated that it would be necessary to shift 73 million cubic metres but when the work was finally completed it would be nearer to 161 million cubic metres they had moved)

It was all very interesting and a simply gigantic task they had undertaken to build this canal so no wonder it was taking such a long time to get finished. When finished it would be 50 miles long and take 8 hours to pass through.....

Next morning we left on the second to last leg - the train trip to Balboa where I once again had to oversee the organising of all the luggage. I was getting a bit tired of all these trunks and crates by now. But this would be the last time and then the boat

sailed on to Paita where I was to meet my love so I was getting pretty excited by this time - only a few more days until I saw Alf again and reached my new home . I was talking to the Guard on the train and he told me it was estimated that one man had died for every sleeper on the track -that is an awful toll of human life, but they told me it was progress!!

At Balboa I made sure that all my goods and chattels were safely transferred to the coastal vessel which was to take me to the small port of Paita where at last I was to meet Alf.....

As the boat pulled into the wharf at Paita I was scanning the people waiting and there he was - my beloved Alf and didn't he look great – all tanned and had had lost a couple of stone in weight. When we finally landed he rushed over and held us both so tightly we were very nearly squashed. Albert was overjoyed and clung very tightly to his Dada.

“Oh, Susan darling, you don't know how good it is to see you again. I have been so lonely but now that you are here I will be able to get on with things properly. Life really has not been worth living without you and I fear I have been a poor excuse of a man.”

The way I was hugged and kissed left no doubt in my mind that I was very loved woman indeed.

It was fairly late when we arrived and it had been a long day for Albert who by now was getting a bit scratchy so we had a quick bite where I was introduced to Tacos and then we went to the hotel where we were to stay overnight before taking off on the very last lap to Talara.....

Before retiring for the night I said to Alf that I must use the lavatory -where is it?

I was aghast when he said “Well love, you see that hole in the verandah outside our window, that is the toilet. Things are a bit primitive in South America!!”

“But Alf, there are people walking along the footpath under the verandah”

“Never mind Susan, they know very well to get out of the way.”

Anyway, needs must so I duly squatted over said hole and I must say it was no easy matter as the long tightish skirts of the day did not give much room for this sort of manoeuvre. Having dealt with that matter and made sure that Albert was settled, I finally took stock of my surroundings.....As my eyes took in the flyblown windows jammed shut and quite obviously never opened, graced by ragged curtains; the floor covered in worn and cracked linoleum with a tatty coconut mat and the bedwell that defied description sagging almost to the floor. I could feel my shoulders getting very stiff indeed and my chin jutting out. Alf looked at me and said

“Oh dear Susan, your eyes have gone very green, am I in trouble?”

I have to explain that I have the family eyes, real chameleon eyes which change colour depending upon what I am wearing, what the weather is like and what mood I am in; ranging through all the shades of blue and green and even when very emotional to a brownish green like stagnant water, but always when I am cross they are bright green. All our family has these eyes marked on my Passport as Hazel, but in fact having three distinct rings of colour - an outer ring of greyish blue, a middle ring of clear bluish green and an inner ring around the pupil of a brownish colour.

I pulled myself up to my full 5 feet one inches and finally burst out..

“Alf Foster, I have come halfway around the world to be with you - I did think that you would have arranged decent accommodation for our re-union night!”

Alf took me by the shoulders and gently turned me to face him and said with his blue eyes twinkling like stars...

“But Susan darling, this is the best hotel in town and what is more this is the best room of the best hotel in town !!!!! I checked them all. Perhaps this is one of the strange places your gypsy warned you about. Come on love, let’s go to bed and by the way you can forget your nightgown tonight – after such a long time I want to feel every inch of my beautiful wife against me”. What a romantic thing to say I am so lucky.

Who could be angry with a man like that so I took another look at the bed and laughed

“If we sleep on that bed we are going to wake up with broken backs so help me get the mattress on the floor and let us hope there are no bugs about”.

We duly did this and two well loved bodies showed just how much they had missed each other. I had expected that Alf might be in a big hurry after all this time apart, but no my Alf is a wonderful lover and he caressed me and kissed me all over until I was quite bemused and when he finally entered me I whispered to him “Welcome home my love” and he said.

“I do love you so much Susan darling, and I hope that you will not be sorry that you have followed me to South America, but I am just so happy to have you back beside me that I could fair burst with happiness.”

We had certainly missed each other and made love several times that night so were a little tired but very happy in the morning when we boarded the small coastal steamer which was to take us along with mail and supplies to our final destination

Talara.....

It is a very romantic sounding name Talara, but believe me there was nothing in the least romantic about the place when we arrived, I was utterly appalled.

“But Alf” I cried “There is absolutely nothing here, it is a desert. How can we live here?’ There is just sand everywhere.”

“Oh, Darling, I know it looks bad, but I have got a brand new house built for us to live in. Please don’t turn around and go home. I could not bear it.”

“I do not think I am going to like living in a land with no trees or gardens or anything else much either”.

“At least we are together again, so please give it a go and see what happens”

As we drew near to the wharf I could see that the whole population of the place – 3 white men and a scattering of natives and dogs were assembled to meet the boat

they all made me feel so welcome that I thought

“Perhaps this will be bearable after all”.

.....

Now we had to unload all this tremendous amount of luggage again but this time I did not have to worry about things as my lovely strong Alf was there to take care of things. It was quite a task getting the horses to drag all the luggage up to the house but it was finally managed and

CHAPTER FOUR

HOME AT LAST

As we walked up the path to our new house Alf said It's just as well you were not here a week earlier, as the carpenters have only just finished. Doesn't look too bad, does it?'

" I have to admit that it looks very nice indeed but before I really inspect things let's have a cup of tea". Sounds pretty easy but I was just about to learn how much more difficult everything was going to be in Talara. For a start we had to find out which of the large number of boxes contained the kitchen things – Luckily the shipping company had marked each box. Well we discovered the kettle and cups and then we had to get a fire started in the range – Alf had got a firewood supply when the men had felled timber for the wharf but there was no kindling so first we had to find the box that contained the hatchet and then break up one of the boxes so of course we had to unpack it first. By the time the tea was brewed (Alf had at least ordered some basic supplies)we were well and truly ready for one.

Then I had to find the box containing linen so that I could make the beds up but decided to leave everything else until next day . And so to bed – what a joy to be able to cuddle up to my beloved husband every night from now on. Tired or not we had to christen the new bed by making love several times. I really was home!!

I had to admit that the new house with its wide verandah did look quite alright but when Alf said they were only just finished he had not exaggerated as the workmen's tools were still around the place, every corner was full of wood shavings and dust was everywhere - I could see that my work was going to start in earnest next morning and then I noticed something rather strange..... in every cupboard and on every surface and lots and lots all over the bed, were little notes written in Spanish and

when I asked what they were Alf laughed and said that it was a sort of a tradition.

“The Workmen have left us the sort of welcome they usually leave for honeymooners.

They have a very lewd sense of humour and I have to say Susan love, that some of those notes are very rude and very descriptive indeed and I am not going

to tell you what they say!! They are not too far wrong though are they? After nearly 12 months apart we really are starting out anew.” At that he chased me round the

bedroom but would not tell me what the notes said and he burnt them all

Then I took a good look at my new surroundings I told Alf that he had better call the carpenters back as the house would need two more rooms.....

“Whatever for? he said “This is quite a big house”.

“Yes, but where are we to store supplies?”

“There are lots of cupboards in the kitchen.”

Just like a man. Alf had not considered the mechanics of feeding a family in a place where there was no corner store to run to if in fact you ran out of something and of course everything would have to be canned dried or bottled and other things like flour , sugar, potatoes, carrots and onions would have to be bought in bulk; all of this was going to take up a lot of space. Also we needed somewhere to keep charcoal for the stove and paraffin for the lamps and somewhere to keep all the spare things I had had to bring for four years. Another thing, Alf had told me he had engaged a village girl to help me and I needed a room in case she had to sleep over say I was ill or something and who knows, perhaps in the future we may have guests to stay.

Thus it was that eventually we ended up with an L shaped house with a wide verandah all round and concrete steps in front.

On the second day Alf arrived home with a shy native girl -”This is Domingo which means Sunday in Spanish, so I suppose she was born on a Sunday. She speaks very little English so I hope you can make her understand what you want done.”

“Hello Domingo” I said -at least she would know that for a welcome.

“Bueno Dios(Good Day) Meez Fostair” she said.

So far so good I thought, well lets see if she knows how to clean as this place really needs some sorting out. I got out my English/Spanish dictionary and said hopefully

“Limpio (clean) suelo (floor)grato (Please) Domingo”

“Ah, si Meez Fostair”

Well now we are getting somewhere I thought and when Domingo carefully swept the floor then picked up the bucket I thought to myself “Perhaps this is going to be easier than I thought”-Oh dear me no.....

Domingo came in from outdoors with a bucketful of not water but sand and proceeded to throw it carefully all over the floor. Alf laughed when I told him -apparently the native quarters' houses all had dirt floors and that was how they were freshened up. Sweep out the old dirt and give a new layer of sand. Here we had to start all over again with me actually showing Domingo what I wanted done .She was appalled that you would use precious water (agua) on the floor, but we got it all sorted out at last. Water was a bit of a problem-We were surrounded by the sea and had to distil seawater for general use but for drinking water we had one tap in the village, bringing water from a spring in the far away mountains..

. Every day a boy from the village would bring us up two tanks of sea water on the back of his donkey and these were emptied into our holding tank suspended above a great block of limestone. By the time it had dripped through and been channelled into another tank it was halfway passable for bathing and laundry but water for drinking still had to be carried up from the tap in the village and that had to be boiled before I would touch it.

Domingo and I got along just fine so it was not long before the place looked like home once we had made and hung curtains, placed ornaments and personal things about the place got all the cupboards stocked and I was just beginning to think that just maybe this might not be too bad a place to live after all when I went down with some

virulent tropical bug and thought that maybe I would not live at all. I was most dreadfully ill with vomiting and the most awful dysentery --I literally had nothing at all pass my lips for over a week and then just lemon and barley water or boiled water and glucose for several weeks.

Poor Alf was distraught "Please don't die on me Susan" he pleaded "If I thought I had bought you out here just to lose you, I would go mad".

I assured him that I did not plan to die and that if I did, it would not be on purpose. But looking back I must have come very close to the pearly gates as I really was very very ill and when I eventually got shakily to my feet again Alf was overjoyed and said

"Good Gracious, I have got back the girl I married - look I can put my two hands around your waist again. I have to say love, that these days I prefer you with a bit more meat on the bones, so we must feed you up and get you back to normal as soon as possible."

Once I started to eat again I was soon back to my old self and then I found out that while I had been so ill and just unable to even think about Albert, Domingo had brought up several of her younger brothers to keep an eye on him while she was so busy attending to me and keeping the household running. I was grateful at first - I think, but less sure when Albert came running into the kitchen shouting away at me in Spanish. Quite excited he was and showing off his new command of the language .Of course children pick up languages like they pick up measles but I had no idea what he was saying so gently said.

"Speak English please Albert, you know I cannot speak Spanish" Off he went again gabbling away nineteen to the dozen.

"Albert" I said more sharply "Speak English PLEASE "

But No, the Spanish continued to pour out of those baby lips that had only just recently mastered English.

"Albert, for goodness sake, what are you talking about, I cannot understand you."At this he danced around me wagging one little finger at me and chuckled "Aha

Mama - Ochos de Gato, Ochos de Gato” his blue eyes twinkling just as his father’ s do when he is being mischievous. I got out my trusty English/Spanish - Spanish/English dictionary at this and found that what he was saying was in fact “Cat’s Eyes” .Oh Dear, those chameleon eyes of mine were at it again. I could see that I was going to have to work harder at learning the local language.

I have to say that just getting the meals was a bit of an adventure all by itself - first of all there was no shortage of lovely fish, living as we did right in the middle of a fishing village. Still every now and again we felt the need of some meat, so once in a while a few cattle were driven over the mountains to Talara. With no water or feed on the way the poor things were quite distressed by the time they arrived and had to be killed at once - probably quite happy to die I should say. Once butchered and split up amongst the residents we then had the problem of keeping the meat away from the rats - horrible black beasts which gave me the horrors. We had a sort of gallows arrangement with a strong metal safe having a cone shaped top, which was pulled up on a rope to keep it out of the way. The rats must have been able to smell the meat though as many of them climbed the post and tried to get into the safe. The tin roof was too smooth and slanted for their claws and we sometimes used to find them dead on the ground in the morning. Horrible big black things – I hated them but the villagers used to eat them oohh! After all this trouble I was not too sure if it was worth it either as the beef was pretty stringy and needed to be cooked for hours to make it palatable. Bread was another problem - I had made my own bread in England and had quite a reputation for the quality I might say, but in South America it was impossible to get yeast so we had to make do with scones and biscuits. The villagers did make a sort of crisp roll which we sometimes had for morning tea. If left until lunchtime however, they had the taste and appearance of damp cardboard. There was a bakery at a village half a day away up the coast from Talara and I tried getting loaves from there. A local boy went up early in the morning and several times I gave him a linen cloth to cover the bread but somehow these always got ”Lost” so I had to make

do with a newspaper cover. By the time the donkey had been driven back to Talara in the heat of the day, the bread had lost something of its appeal .With the bread wrapped in newspaper and the donkey sweating profusely, by the time it arrived you could actually read the newspaper off the outside of the loaf if you held it up to the mirror .Having cut off the offending outside there was very little left except the doughy middle so I soon gave that one up. I really was used to my bread and butter and this was a real hardship - I was finding this a very strange way of life indeed. We had to do without proper bread until several months later when a millionaire's yacht dropped anchor in our port and we were invited on board to meet the owner. For morning tea there were delicious crusty bread rolls so I took myself down to the galley and asked the cook just how he managed. He showed me how to make my own yeast and gave me a starter so after that we always had lovely bread .

Of course with nothing able to grow in the area, fresh fruit and vegetables were luxuries we could only enjoy when a supply ship arrived from Lima. Apart from that we had to make do with tinned varieties. We did, however, manage to get meals on the table every day although it took a great deal more effort and organisation than doing the same job at home in England and I was very glad of Domingo's help so I was pretty upset when she told me that her family was leaving Talara as her father had got a job at the Oilfields - I had just got used to her ways and was not looking forward to breaking in a new girl.

Santos was the name of my new helper and seemed quite suitable and helpful until one day I noticed that she was getting very chunky around the middle so I asked her, pointing to her stomach.....

“Un Bebe, Santos ?”

“Oh no Meez Fostair No Bebe” she said

Now you can't fool me - I had been pregnant myself (three times) and I positively knew the signs but left the matter for a couple of weeks and then asked again.

“Un Bebe, Santos ?” “No Bebe” was once again the reply.

This went on and on and became a bit of a joke as week after week Santos got plumper and week after week I asked the same question "Un Bebe?" but always the same answer. Well she was still doing everything that I required so I am afraid I decided to just let things slide. One morning Santos arrived with a younger girl who looked about 11 or 12." Now I hev Bebe " she said "I bring sister Rosita to help you, she big strong girl near fourteen." Poor lamb, I guess the money was important to her family so Santos had waited until the very last minute so that Rosita could be just that much older. I found out that in fact she had just passed her thirteenth birthday but I am afraid she was not much more than a baby herself and certainly not capable of coping with Albert who was three by now and becoming quite a handful. I felt rather sad to have to send them away. It was only a couple of weeks later that Santos brought her new baby boy to see me and told me that he was to be named Alberto after my little boy. She also told me that she and her Ricardo were to be married and Alberto would be baptised the next time the priest made a visit to the district. This was apparently the local way of things --every couple of years a priest would appear and all the couples who had been living together were married and all the babies born during that time were baptised !!

So I was once again without assistance so was very glad when shortly after Alf came home with the news that he had another girl for me. Her name was Maria and having been Convent educated she had a pretty good command of English - she was home to visit her family and was glad to find a position close to home. I snapped her up and she was with me for the whole time until I left Talara, except for six weeks when she ran off with a married man with a very unsavoury reputation. Having been badly treated and beaten for the six weeks Maria ran away from him and was very happy to be back in our household as we were to have her. I had hoped this would happen so made do with just daily helpers. Albert loved her and things went very smoothly indeed with Maria helping us all - she became a dear friend as well and helped me with my Spanish.

CHAPTER FIVE

PROGRESS IS MADE

“Things are really starting to move now, love” said Alf arriving home from work one evening, “We are on the final stages of the wharf and when that is finished the bigger ships will be able to dock and bring us the heavy machinery and sheet steel etc. that will be needed to build the pipeline from Negritos and also the steel holding tanks. The carpenters are also busy and the single men’s quarters, Cookhouse and Dining Room cum Recreation Hall are all well under way as is my proper Administration Office to take the place of the shed I have used up to date. Shortly they will start on some married quarters to house all the sheetmetal workers, structural steel workers, plumbers and electricians that we will be needing, so soon my darling, you will have plenty of other women to talk to and Albert will have some other European children to play with. I know he is as happy as a sand boy playing with the local children, but I am afraid he is becoming quite wild and needs a bit of settling down.” I was most impressed and said so. “It must have been a tremendous job getting this far with very little help - building wharves is not really what you have been used to, is it?” “No, but we have had a bit of help from Nature.”

Alf explained that the coast of Peru has a bit of a freak climate and is in fact drier than the Sahara Desert having an annual rainfall of around 5 c.m. and many years it just does not rain at all. This is brought about by the fact that although Peru lies entirely within the Tropics, the coast is cooled by an abnormally cold current (The Peru Current) which makes it impossible for the coast to hold much moisture. We could

actually see rain falling in the Andes which are lush and green but most of the moisture falls East of the mountains so between these two factors Talara is mostly a desert.

Not to say that it never rains here though, once in 1891 it rained heavily for three months(every day) and just about washed the place right out to sea

“See that great gash in the hillside? That is where tons and tons of earth were washed completely away. This was very lucky for me as the washing out to sea of such a large amount of earth scoured a great deep channel which makes an ideal spot to form a harbour - nice deep water close to land.”

I was looking forward to seeing all this progress as life was a little boring for me just now. I was fully settled into my new house and apart from the trouble with getting meals for the family and finding enough water to keep clothes clean I had not a great deal to do especially as I had Maria to help me. My house was the first to be built in the area for 20 years, and I gave a thought to how life must have been for the first families in the area - it must have been pretty grim as even now still not too good.

Oil had been known about in this area from the time of the Incas and from the time of Pizarro was collected in trenches and converted, by boiling, into pitch which was used to line the porous earthenware jars in which the Peruvians transported their fermented liquors.

In the 1870's the Land Rights for prospecting in the area, had been acquired by a Mr. H.W.C. Tweddle and the London and Pacific Petroleum Company had been formed .He and his son lived in tents originally until Mr. Charles Campbell arrived and built 5 houses and a small hostel in Talara for the prospectors - The only proper houses built here until mine. Mr. Campbell arrived in South America in 1871 to seek his fortune and somehow remained as he still lived in Talara some 40 odd years later and was undoubtedly the oldest resident in every sense of the word. He had been given the Honorary title of Port Captain until the Port was finished .I cannot imagine anyone living in this desolate place by choice but apparently Mr.Campbell did as he lived here

until he was in his 80th year when he was given a right royal farewell and finally went home to England to die.

Prospecting had been done around the area with Talara as the base to work from but it was not until now that commercial quantities of oil had been discovered. Negritos where the find was eventually a slightly bigger place but as there was no road to connect the two places over the hills, all supplies were sent around the coast on balsa rafts and delivery was by no means certain. Eventually a rail was built over the lowest part of the hill and donkeys would pull a cart up to the top and just let it go- Needless to say they did not send anything breakable.

Many of the first residents died from the terrible tropical fever which so nearly claimed my life, so I really did feel like some sort of pioneer to be one of the first (but not quite the first) residents in this part of the world.

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After the completion of the wharf, things did indeed begin to move quite quickly and it seemed no time at all after that ships began arriving almost daily carrying all manner of equipment and materials – Cranes and motors seemingly miles of pipes and tons of steel plates to be transformed into shining tanks alongside the wharf but what is more important many new families were arriving and the social life of Talara took a major turn for the better. We were now well into 1913 and with the war clouds gathering over Europe there was a real urgency to get things moving very quickly as it was obvious that with the mechanisation of all forms of transport that large quantities of oil were going to be needed to keep it running. As soon as they arrived and were settled, the new welders began the task of building the pipeline from Negritos and the enormous tanks necessary for oil storage - suddenly from being a sleepy village Talara was now a hive of industry with new things to be seen every day . The new workers were housed on the flat close to where their work area was situated but unfortunately it was also close to the area set aside for the native single men's quarters and from the

beginning there was some trouble with natives intruding and there was also some theft. Alf was a great favourite with the native workforce but there were many times when he was afraid that the trouble might not be smoothed over. He hated having to segregate the two areas but unfortunately some of the wives were getting rather frightened and a large, high fence had to be built to separate the workmen's houses from the native quarters. Any European young men were housed in the English Club which was the name of a sort of hostel built up near the first five houses, along with a chapel. I have to say that I was glad that our house was some distance away from the village although that did mean that it was a bit of a tramp down to visit the newcomers. My Spanish was improving but it was lovely to have other Europeans to speak English with and also to give us news from home. The ships also of course brought mail----- I was amused to get a letter from my son Jack in England (Oh dear I am afraid both my sons had inherited their father's peculiar sense of humour). Apparently Jack had been learning the organ as his cultural subject for the year but was most uninterested in the matter and told me that while he was supposed to be doing his practice he had wedged the bellows open somehow and instead of playing he had a Sexton Blake book propped up on the music stand. His grandmother who was rather deaf heard some noise coming from upstairs so thought all was well" .Never mind" said Jack "I won first prize for Organ Playing and got a copy of Tom Brown's Schooldays as my prize" Then he spoilt it all by telling me that actually he was the only boy learning the organ so of course he got first prize! It was lovely to hear from him but it did make me realise just how far away from home I really was and I worried about his safety if there was a war in the near future.

Alf was very busy at this stage organising his new work force and planning their work for the day so he was away from home quite long hours each day and he did worry that things might not be ready in time.

About this time the English & Pacific Petroleum Co. was taken over by Standard Oil of America so a good few of the new residents were Americans who brought with them

their hustle and knowledge of a greatly more mechanised society than we were used to. The whole place began to hum with activity and before too long the skyline was altered by the addition of three enormous tanks up on the hill above the harbour with numerous smaller ones at the dockside. The pipeline was also well on the way and it did not seem at all long before Alf came home one day and said “Well Susan, today’s the day, now we are at the stage where Talara is finally in business. Now that the pipeline is finished, the oil will start to flow and ships will now be coming from all over the world to purchase oil from Talara. Isn’t that exciting?”

I suppose it was but the thought of War was now beginning to be on everyone’s minds and I did think it was awful that here at Talara we were getting ready to supply the fuel to run such a war more efficiently.....

“ So now Susan, I can start on the Refinery which will produce finer fuels for cars and aeroplanes. It is a complicated process and will need a lot of specialised equipment so I must first get a very high and strong wall built right around the site to make sure nothing is stolen or spoiled. .

However I do believe that the hard part of my job is now over and of course I will have a lot more engineers to help me now.”

I did ask at this time “ If you can already sell the oil as it is,then why do you need this Oil Refinery which is going to take so long to build.”

“Well Susan, it is a bit complicated to understand . Raw or unprocessed crude oil is not generally useful. Although “light,sweet” (low viscosity,low sulphur) crude oil can be used directly as a burner fuel for steam vessel propulsion,the lighter elements form explosive vapors in the fuel tanks and are therefore hazardous especially in warships.Instead the hundreds of different hydrocarbon molecules in crude oil are separated in a refinery into components which can be used as fuels and lubricants. The crude oil is separated into fractions by fractional distillation”

“ You have lost me darling, I do not understand – how is oil formed to have all these hydrocarbons?”

"Well it is generally accepted that oil formed from the fossilized remains of dead plants and animals by exposure to heat and pressure in the Earth's crust over millions of years. Over time the decayed residue was covered by layers of mud and silt, sinking further down into the earth's crust and preserved there between hot and pressured layers, gradually transforming into oil reservoirs. Oil in general has been used since early human history to keep fires ablaze, and also for warfare. Remember the stories of our old castles and boiling oil being poured onto invaders?

Until the invention of the combustion engine there was not a lot of use for oil except for kerosene which was used for lamps and also tar which was used for roads but now I can see that its uses are going to be enormous and I am sure a great number of new uses we have not even imagined, will be discovered. Oil is really important!!

Actually we are a bit ahead of schedule and it will be a few weeks until the next shipment arrives so I think, my darling, that you and I will take Albert for a holiday. I should like to see what Bolivia is like so first we will sail to Lima for a few days and then on to Alrica a port just inside the border of Bolivia. From there we will catch the train to La Paz the capital of Bolivia. What a lovely surprise and it would be good to get away from Talara for a while. I have to say that my English spirit pined for something green instead of all this sand. I did have a little bit of green though!! I had been complaining about the matter to a friend who advised me to buy some pineapples next time a supply ship arrived and keep the tops in pots. I did that and had a pot each side of my front door – they were a bit spiky looking but at last they were green.

A couple of days to make arrangements for the men to do maintenance while he was away and for us to get packed and then we were off – I was quite excited as I believed that Bolivia was quite different to Peru. We had to wait for the coastal boat to arrive and then we were off at last. After a couple of days we were landed at Lima and what a

luxury for me after Talara We stayed at a nice hotel which even had an indoor Water Closet (had to stop Albert climbing on the seat to pull the chain all the time).

We stayed in Lima for a few days looking at all the churches and gardens and even eating out at restaurants – it was heaven to have my wonderful husband all to myself for a spell and we wandered around hand in hand with Albert overjoyed to ride on his father's shoulders.

In Bolivia we travelled by train going higher and higher as La Paz the capital was a good height above sea level and we found it very cold and we had to invest in some much heavier clothing. I was very interested in the local women who all looked like tea cosies to me as they all wore little round black hats and voluminous skirts all in lovely bright colours with sort of geometric designs. Someone later told me that they wore everything they owned layer on top of layer as it was very cold being so far above sea level. Seemed rather strange to me as they would have had to buy a bigger size every time they got a new frock. I also wondered whether they took them all off at night as it must take some time but I supposed they must have done so sometimes so that their husbands could get anywhere near to them. From the number of children running about I assumed that they must have got undressed sometimes !!

We also took a few trips away from Lima to see some more of the country. One time we had a guide who took us on a horse trek to see Lake Titicaca the highest lake in the world. It was huge looked like a sea to me and we were very interested in the Uros people who lived in reed houses on floating islands.

They all looked quite happy and if they started to sink a bit they just piled more of the reeds (which grew in profusion) on top. Only problem was that with all this rotting vegetation the place was very smelly. The thought of having a toddler in such a shaky home filled me with alarm (they must learn to swim before they can walk but) in any case I held very tightly to Albert's hand that day.

Another time we took another trek up into the mountains to a place where the natives do shrunken heads. When someone dies they decapitate them (I believe that the rest

of the body is laid up on a cliff for the vultures and wild animals to deal with.) Sounds a bit queer to me but it does save a lot of ground being used for cemeteries I suppose but at least the heads are treated with the greatest of respect – the brains are extracted somehow (I didn't ask!) and then the skulls are filled with a mixture of herbs and spices which soften and shrink the bones so that after a time they have all these little heads about the size of a large orange and with leathery skin with quite recognisable features and even some of them still had hair. Albert wanted to take one home to play with but I did not anything like that in my house.

We were then back in Lima for a few more days and then home to Talara. Home, yes it was home now and I was strangely pleased to be back. They do say home is where the heart is and my heart was with my Alf so home it definitely was.

CHAPTER SIX

1914

In the afternoon of 4th August, 1914 we heard on the radio that WAR HAD BEEN DECLARED against Germany. On this very day there was a German ship in Port loading up 44 gallon drums of crude oil and this put the American Manager in a real spot. Surely America would come into the war to support England but as the day wore on and no announcement was forthcoming, he took the matter into his own hands and impounded the German vessel, so although America did not join the war for a long time afterwards, in this tiny outpost America did indeed enter the war right at the very beginning. Now this gave the authorities in America a bit of a problem as with the official line being that America was not at war, they could not very well take prisoners now could they?? The Port Manager refused to let the ship go thinking quite rightly that the oil they carried would be used to sink English and American ships so there was a bit of an impasse while the matter was sorted out and the ship stayed in Port for over six months. It was not at all practical to keep a whole shipload of men on board and in fact the ship had to be cleared for cleaning so of course the German crew had to be allowed ashore where they mixed with the natives, got a few girls pregnant and had fights with the local men, but the worst thing was that the Fascist crew members sought out the natural troublemakers in Talara and instilled into them their own peculiar ideas. This caused a lot of trouble and Alf had to deal with a good few strikes so you could say the war was being fought here too

Many of the young single men left us at this time, to go and join the army so the workforce was changing all the time and I have to say that I felt very lucky that my Alf simply could not be spared from his essential work to go to be killed or injured. I suppose in his heart he probably would have liked to go as men do seem to like a good scrap but there was just no question. Oil was going to be so important in the future that he just had to stay here. I hoped that Jack would be safe in England.

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One day Santos came to see me in a great state of excitement "The Priest he come to Talara next month and there is to be a Fiesta, Ricardo and me we be married and Alberto he be baptised. You be his Godmother, Yes?" Well of course I was very flattered as there was not really too much contact between the native people and the Europeans so of course I promised that I would do as she asked. I had already promised to be godmother to beautiful little Victoria Harris - the daughter of one of our engineers and the very elegant and well educated lady who lived with him. They were not married which was a bit of a scandal in 1913 but she was always called Mrs. Harris and a lovelier person would be hard to find.

The whole town was buzzing with excitement as this was to be quite an occasion - after two years and with the increase in population of the area there were indeed a large number of weddings and baptisms required and I have to say that I was looking forward to the occasion as much as anyone. There was to be a Grand Ball as the climax of the proceedings and it was a long time since I had had a chance to dress up and feel feminine -yes I was looking forward to this time with real anticipation. Imagine my state of mind when Alf came home the day before and told me that he could not go as a ship was due to arrive with important new staff and some delicate equipment which he had to take charge of personally, but he said that I should go with the others who were leaving a day early to travel round the hills by donkey. My face must have fallen as I said to him "If you are not going, then I am not going either. There is no way I am travelling anywhere in this godforsaken place without my husband." Then I went away into my room and had a good cry.

Next morning I was still a bit on the gloomy side and Alf. stepped very carefully around me before he went off to work. At lunchtime he came home in great excitement grabbed me around the waist and said "Yes you will go to the ball, Yes you will go to the Ball. The ship came in early and all is unloaded and dealt with".

“But Alf, it is now too late, we will never get around the mountain in time”

“No love, we are going straight over the top”

“But how?” I was really quite puzzled.

“You know the Jigger thing that we transfer supplies from Negritos -- Well that my love will be your carriage. Cinderella will go to the Ball so go and get your bag packed and your prettiest gown out of the trunk and we will be off in about an hour. Margaret and Bob (Our neighbours) are coming too and I have arranged for Maria to mind her little boy over here with Albert”. Real masterful stuff.

I still could not see how we were going to manage but was past arguing so did as I was told but was still pretty aghast when we eventually arrived at the base of what is really quite a big hill that we were going to scale.

“How ever are we going to get up there?”

At this Alf and Bob armed themselves with a couple of pretty solid bits of wood and instructed us girls “On you get and stow the bags under the seats .Now if the two of you will work that lever thing in the middle Bob and I will shove these bits of wood under the wheels to stop us sliding back”.

Seemed like a pretty precarious way to travel but we did as instructed and moving a few inches at a time we eventually reached the top .At this stage both the men who were by this time pretty tired and very dusty, climbed aboard with us and Alf said as he let off the brake “Hold on to your hats, this is going to be a lot quicker going down the other side.” As the little carriage gathered speed we did indeed hang onto everything but started to enjoy the whole adventure and I have to say I let forth a few “Whee’s” as we hurtled down the hillside. At the bottom we had to hold very tight to the sides as the end of the ride was protected with padding and the carriage bounced back and forth several times before coming to rest. We must have looked pretty dishevelled by this time with our long hair escaping our hats as a result of the rushing wind as we careered down the slope. We were all very dusty as well but Alf looked at me and said “I’m very glad I found a way to get you here darling, your eyes are shining like stars”

After cleaning ourselves up at the Governor's residence where we were to spend the night, we went down into the street to enjoy the festivities. I was just in time for the christenings and was duly installed as little Victoria's and little Alberto's Godmother. Unfortunately we were a bit late for the weddings - Weddings first Christenings second as it would have happened in a normal society!!

After the Christenings had all been completed the Governor came out onto the verandah of his house which was two storied and he threw small coins to the children - there seemed to be thousands of them but then South America is a very prolific place. It was just like a lolly scramble back home at the village fair.

As darkness began to fall the fiesta started and for a small place such as Negritos there was a very good display of the type of fiesta the South Americans do so well and the procession took some time to pass. In such a poor place you would imagine that beads and feathers etc would be in short supply but No ,some of the headdresses and costumes were very elaborate indeed and with the music and light and movement all round this was a magical time indeed .After dinner we bathed and got ready for the Ball and what an occasion this was - I am sure it must be the highlight of my time in South America - we danced and we sang and listened to the entertainments followed by a sumptuous supper. Goodness knows where the ingredients had been purchased from or how much they must have cost. I simply did not care as I was having such a lovely time. The hall was beautifully decorated with flowers and at one stage in the evening some glittery silver stuff was showered down on us from the ceiling and looked very pretty in everyone's hair. Margaret was wearing a very elegant black gown and mine was a lovely shade of sea green. Alf said to me "Susan darling those eyes of yours are at it again - they have gone the exact colour of your dress and you look quite beautiful" What a romantic man and how I just love him to pieces It must have been very late when we finally fell into bed but next morning Alf was up bright and early and hurrying us to get on our way as it really was essential that he be at the works. Going back was not such a trial as from the Negritos end the carriage was hauled up to the

top by a team of donkeys as it is usually heavy with supplies but we still had the wild ride down the other side. It had been an adventure but Margaret and I decided the whole thing had been well worth the trouble but the adventure was not quite over yet.....

Next day we tried to get the glittery stuff remaining out of our hair. The men with their short hair had no trouble in brushing it all out but tiny flakes were stuck in Margaret's and my hair so we decided that some of our precious water must be used to wash it out and.....OUR HAIR TURNED BRIGHT GREEN. Must have been some sort of metallic element but Alf laughed when he came home and said "Now you have hair to match your eyes" .I suppose it must have been a bit funny but have to say I did not share the joke when I went down to the village and all the natives laughed at these funny women with green hair. Never mind it did come out after a few more washes and things got back to normal.

With the war escalating in Europe our lives in this far flung outpost became quite busy - as all the white women had natives to help with their housework (it was actually expected that we would use the native girls as employment in the area was hard to come by and this way at least some of the girls were earning some money to help the family finances) we were freed to do our share of work for the war effort. Every day we would assemble at the Community Centre and spend most of the day rolling bandages and knitting scarves and blankets for the soldiers to use so in fact our lives became a good deal more bearable as a result of the war. This seems an awful thing to say but was in fact the truth. Another thing - the ladies were not too disturbed by the fact that the German ship was still in Port. While the crew were very rough and ready chaps the Captain was a real Prussian Gentleman actually of noble birth and it was a great pleasure to us all to be invited on board for Bridge Afternoons which we all enjoyed immensely. That was about all the excitement that we had at this time and we really must have been very hard working and produced a great amount of goods as the Red Cross gave all the ladies of the town a blue medallion each for their war effort. The

effect of the German ship might have been quite pleasant for the ladies of the town but I am afraid it had a much more sinister side. The crew members of course could not be cooped up on board the whole time so had to be let ashore where they mixed with the local people who embraced quite eagerly the fascist ideas which they brought with them. Before the seizing of the ship relations with the local people had been very good as Alf. was meticulous in seeing that they all shared in the growing prosperity of Talara. He insisted on building better houses and quarters for the natives and saw to it that supplies were always in the local store which was now in evidence. Now, however with all these foreign ideas instilled into their heads, we were faced for the first time with work stoppages and strikes which was very serious for the oil from Talara was becoming very important as the war went on and more and more vehicles were mechanised.

The stoppages and strikes were becoming worse every day until one day a very bad element in the area stirred up our local people and incited them to violence which erupted in a very nasty fashion, One week when these rebels started rioting in earnest and even cut the pipeline from Negritos and set fire to the oil. We were all terrified and as there were two ships in port loading oil at the time all the women and children went aboard to make sure of their safety. The only trouble was of course that all we did was worry about whether or not our menfolk were in trouble. There were a lot more native people than there were Europeans !!. After a while it all simmered down and the troublemakers were fired or sent to other places and work was hurried along to repair the pipeline. Any delay was very serious now and of course work on the Refinery had to be suspended while repairs were effected. I have to say that we were all very frightened and glad when the whole affair was over.

About this time we had a visit from friends who had a farm a bit further inland - they arrived with several horses including two with side saddles for the ladies. In 1914 it was still considered most indecent for nicely brought up ladies to ride astride a horse as the men did so of course I was helped up onto the horse and off we went for a picnic in the

hills. I have to say that riding side-saddle is the most uncomfortable position I have ever been in. Well the picnic was lovely and I really enjoyed being away from the heat and dust of Talara for a little while - it surprised me how green and pleasant Peru was just a few miles further inland. We rode up into the foothills of the mountains and really had a lovely day and then it was time to return home

Wouldn't you know it? We got hopelessly lost and ride around in circles until finally we caught sight of the oil derricks and then we knew where we were. Having been in the saddle for so many hours I was so sore when I finally dismounted that I could hardly sit for a week. It did however make me realise just how much easier it was to get around on a horse so I got Alf. to buy me one and an ordinary saddle for my birthday. After that I sewed myself a split skirt and rode about on my lovely "Queenie" and found life a lot more convenient and comfortable. No more side saddles for me - think I must have been a bit ahead of my time and a bit of a feminist as I never considered that I should do things just because everyone else thought they were the proper thing to do. I got a bit a strange look from some of my compatriots but did not let it worry me.

CHAPTER 7

ALBERT

My beloved younger son Albert is a very important part of my story in Talara
And I would like to share a few incidents with you.

One day when Albert was about four I was having one of my "Bad" days.

Perhaps it was the wrong time of the month or maybe I had had a slight tiff
with Alf but in any case I was a bit tearful and bemoaning the fact that nothing
was green in Peru and I just longed to see some flowers again. After a while
I saddled up my horse Queenie and trotted off down to the village to at least
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talk to someone from Home. I felt a good deal better after that so after a cup
of tea I went home . When I arrived Maria came running up to me "Where
is Alberto, I thought he was with you". We searched everywhere we could think
of but there was no sign of him. Getting very concerned I contacted Alf at the
Refinery and he organised a search in the village. Albert was not found but
another boy was also missing (Pedro aged all of six) also one of the local
donkeys was nowhere to be found so we all assumed that the two little boys
had gone off somewhere together. Hours went by and I was getting quite panic-
stricken by now when off in the distant we saw a donkey carrying two small boys.
What a relief I did not know whether to laugh or cry when they arrived and
Albert handed me a handful of tiny blue flowers, very much wilted in the strong
Peruvian sunshine, and said to me "These are for you Mama ,you seemed to
be so sad without any flowers and Pedro said he knew where we could get some,
I am sorry if you were worried but it was further than he thought"
Well what could you say after such a lovely thought from a small boy and then.....

Albert started standing on one foot and scratching himself all over – when I Investigated I found that he was absolutely covered in fleas !! Must have been a very flea-ridden donkey. Anyway Albert had to be stripped to the skin and all his clothes (including a favourite sailor shirt) had to be put in a pile and burnt and my wee boy had to be shaved and then washed in Lye soap to get rid of every last flea. It was a very tired and tearful boy who finally got to bed that night and I was a very thankful mother. I had already lost one of my precious sons and was very glad to have Albert home safe and sound.

Shortly after this I went outside one day and saw storm clouds gathering

I said to Maria” Quickly bring in the washing – it is going to rain”

“Oh No” said Maria “She never rain in Talara” and in fact this was the very first time since I had been there. Well we had a good old storm with thunder and lightning and lots of rain and I have to say that I went outside and whooped like an Indian and put out all the buckets I could find. Rainwater is such good stuff for washing the hair. Once again Albert was nowhere to be seen and I found him cowering under the bed absolutely terrified. As he had come from England (where it does rain quite a lot) it never occurred to me that he would not remember but of course he was just a baby when we left. Even when he was quite grown up Albert was still very nervous in storms.

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Next morning Alf called to me “Susan, come and look out the Window”

And to my delight the whole place was green – all the seeds in the ground had germinated and the barren hills were quite beautiful for a change. It did not last however as the strong sunshine wilted all the lovely grass by lunch time and the smell was just terrible.

But it did prove that things would grow in Talara if we could get enough water to the region.

The American manager of Standard Oil came to Alf and said “ Say, Alf, It seems that this place aint a gol-darned desert after all I must get some water pumped here, after all there is plenty in the hills”. Then he went on to say” I can only spare one engineer but could you arrange for local labour and we will get this project under way. Only trouble is we will need an interpreter as the new Engineer just arrived from American speaks no Spanish at all, Do you know Anyone who speaks both English and the local lingo”

Alf replied “ Well of course I can but with the war and all I cannot be spared from the Refinery ,but there is one other person who could do the job”

“We’ll take him “ said the Manager

“It’s my son” said Alf “ He speaks just like a Native in fact I am afraid he is becoming one”.

“We’ll take him, I must have water here”

“But “ said Alf” he is only 5 years old” .” We’ll take him anyway” said the Manager.

I was appalled when Alf told me what was to be done.

“But Alf he is just a baby and this would be dangerous work what are you thinking”

Alf tried to reassure me “ He would not have to be at the workface all the time

And one of the wives who will be helping to cater for the workers will be able to keep an eye on him.

At this moment Albert piped up “ I can do it, I can do it, I want to help bring water to Talara so that Mama can have some flowers” , And thus it was that at 5 years old Albert was paid Foreman of the project to bring Water to Talara.

A cocky little boy with hands on hips telling grown men what to do!!!

Every day Albert would go off with the men (in his little hard hat which Alf had made for him and the little overall which I had sewed) he looked very important with his little lunch box and he positively glowed with pride but I was worried that it would all be a bit too much for such a little boy. But No.....

Each day he came home with stories such as “The men made good progress today and the water pipe is coming along nicely” or “Today we had a bit of a hold-up – there was a big rock in the way and we had to blow it up. I had to tell the men where to put the dynamite and then they made me go a way off and someone pushed a handle on a box and Boom (here the little hands went up) rocks went all over the place. I was a bit worried about all this but Albert took it all in his stride.

I think he was a bit disappointed when the job was at last finished and we had a water supply in Talara.

(Authors Footnote – I would like to see just what a good film director would do with these scenes – a cocky little boy with hands on hips telling grown men what to do !!)

CHAPTER 8

PROGRESS IS MADE

Once the water had been established things took a definite turn for the better – for a start we were able to have a garden and grow a few vegetables and also once you have water (and by now we also had a generator) then you can also have ice and as I had an icebox I soon became quite famous for my Icecream which is one of the easiest recipes I have ever used.

One half a tin of evaporated milk, one half a cup of icing sugar and a few drops of vanilla essence, whip until thick and creamy then freeze.

With all the new people now living in Talara we began to have a bit of a social life and had socials and picnics etc. The town was now growing by leaps and bounds and we even had proper streets and even a church – we did not have a permanent minister but there was a retired minister who acted as pastor. We also had several shops so it was becoming quite civilised.

At the very beginning of our time in Talara there were a couple of young men living in the Hostel and with very little to do in the evenings they decided to start a little newspaper for the English speaking people. At first it was just one cylostyled piece of paper run off on one of those terribly dirty machines which required a typed stencil which was attached and a handle was turned to take a copy. After a few years our newspaper was several properly printed pages and now there were even advertisements for local tradesmen and shops. I kept every copy that was produced while I was in Talara – once every 3 months so I had 16)

On reflection I was glad that I had followed my heart and my husband to this far off land.

AND THEN.....

CHAPTER NINE

1916

By now we had been in Talara for the 4 years of Alf's contract and I asked about going home to England as I was worried about Jack now that the war had been on for 2 years and he had already had a big scare when a bomb was dropped near his grandmother's house and as he ran indoors a piece of shrapnel struck the step just where his foot had been a second before. Whew that was close!!

However with the demand for oil increasing daily Alf had been asked to stay on for a further 6 months to complete an expansion of the original refinery and as life was now so much better I agreed. Oh how I wish that I had not done so. The Refinery was now quite a place with towers and seeming miles of piping curling around so I asked about the process of refining. Alf tried to explain and showed me a diagram showing hydrocarbons contained in crude oil. Each Refinement turned the oil into a different type of fuel which why there were so many towers. It was all a bit complicated for me.

Alf came home one day looking very worried and said

"Oh Susan, I think are going to be in for some trouble – the men down at the refinery are in a very bad mood and are going on strike and it looks very ugly. I do hope we will be alright and I don't actually feel like coping with this right now as I think I am coming down with a bug of some sort".

I felt his brow and he was burning with a terrible fever and I said he must go to bed at once and I would ride Queenie down and tell his second in command that he must deal with things. I duly did this but on my way back I was waylaid by some of the rioters. here can be few things as frightening as a mob of young men (you do not see too many girls in a riot,if any) who are intent on trouble. They seem to be quite

mindless and the mob has a mind of its own just going from place to place looting and burning anything in sight with not a single thought as to the consequences. It seemed to me that the look on the faces of these young men was not – as you might expect – a look of anger or outrage but one of pure glee at the excitement of it all. Well

on my way back from the refinery I met a group of natives who did seem very angry and they pulled me down from my beloved horse and then they killed her in front of me. Slit my beautiful Queenie's throat and there was blood everywhere and I was terrified that I would be the next!! Luckily some of the tradesmen came along just then and rescued me but I had a very bad fright and worst of all I had lost my beloved Queenie. When I finally got back and told Alf what had happened he said "I must go to the Plant- the men all respect me and will listen to me"

I said "But Alf, you are ill you cannot possibly go"

"Susan I must, if disaster is to be avoided"

Well he did not listen to me and dragged himself out of bed and off he went.

He sorted the trouble out as everyone in the area had the greatest respect for him and eventually they listened to the voice of reason.

When he came home I could see that he was very much worse and got him straight into bed and packed as much ice as I could find around him but I am afraid that quelling a riot while in a weakened state had been too much for him and that night my beloved Alf died.

I was totally distraught but had to cope with burying my beloved husband in a foreign land. In tropical climates the dead are buried very quickly so it was that next day we had a service in the little chapel and then Alf was buried in the grounds of the refinery in a little cemetery (quite a few European and Peruvians had died in the four years). I left Talara and I also left my love behind. He had built his Port and Refinery and Talara had killed him. .

CHAPTER 10

AFTER TALARA

After the funeral I was so upset that I decided to leave South America at once and make my way back to England. As the war was in full swing it was too dangerous to sail as many ships had been sunk in the Atlantic and there were certainly no air liners to book a seat on so it was determined that I would see the war out with a cousin in Canada. Thus it was that I was one of the first people to sail through the Panama Canal. Although it was navigable there was much work to be done on the superstructure and landscaping and it was not officially opened until 1920. Albert was entranced with going through the locks but I have to say I was really too sad at leaving my beloved husband and by now a lot of friends behind in Talara. It was now time for Albert to be enrolled in a proper school – he had enjoyed the little local school but now needed some real tuition so in due course after the war ended we landed in England to be met by a very excited Jack and my family .Albert was now 8 (the age Jack had been when we left) but now Jack was nearly 6 ft tall and already shaving. Goodness I said “You are nearly a man- where is my little boy?” At 14 he was still very young of course and had a couple more years of schooling to go so I decided to stay in England until this was complete and then to make a complete new start.

The firm for which Alf had worked offered us transport to anywhere in the World I wanted to go, as some sort of compensation I suppose. Anyway I was finding that there were far too many memories in England so I decided to go to New Zealand which was about as far away as I could go. Thus I landed in Wellington New Zealand but that is another story.....

AND NOW I SUPPOSE YOU WOULD ALL LIKE TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED
TO THE BOX

EPILOGUE

In 2007 my cousin Keith Foster(Albert's son) who lives in Australia told me that he was going on a trip to England and that he intended to call into Peru and Talara on the way home and see if he could find our grandfather's grave. I said to him "How about taking this box of tricks with you and seeing if anyone would be interested?" I gave him the box of papers and photographs that I had been carrying around from place to place for over 65 years.(and before me my Granny had carted them about for nearly 30 years) I simply did not like to throw them away as I thought they could be of interest to someone. I had tried myself to get the consul to do something and I even got a letter translated into Spanish and sent it to the Mayor of Talara but got no reply so this was a good opportunity for me to get rid of this box cluttering up my cupboard.

In Talara now a thriving city and Port with over 100,000 inhabitants Keith contacted the local government officials and was made very welcome and what is more they had a civic reception for him to hand over the box. Apparently there had been a communist uprising at one stage and all the records had been burnt

So they were delighted to receive these records. There was to be a new Museum built for the Centenary and these old records would have pride of place. They also made some locals available to look for the grave. After a lot of searching in the Cemetery the grave was actually located and Keith gave them a little plaque containing just the names and birthdates of his three grandchildren. Next day they called him back and the gravestone had been renovated and the plaque was in place.

A FURTHER FOOTNOTE

In 2010 Keith and his wife Nancy had another trip to Peru and were greeted warmly by the people who had been so kind to them on his last visit . He was shown the new museum where Photostats of the contents of THE BOX were on display. The originals

were thought to be too precious and were in the Archives. So this box which had been twice around the world has finally found a home right where it started from almost a hundred years ago.

As the city of Talara and the oil industry in South America will be coming up for a centenary my little book could be of some interest to someone. I recently googled "TALARA" on the Internet and records for the Refinery do not start until 1917.

As I began – This is a true story and it is a tale that should be told.

THE END

Lesley Stephen (Nee Foster)

13/01/2011.