



# Granny Ban

By Janet Hancock

(Adult Category)

EVERYBODY knows me as Granny Ban, who took a room overlooking the Corn Market back in June. The air is good for my asthma, I tell people, and they nod and smile at a delicate lady from the city, a world away. 'I may go on to Bournemouth,' I venture, although I know I won't.

Each afternoon you'll see me standing on the cobbles of the Corn Market: a short lady, neither fat nor thin, dark hair threaded with white pulled over the ears round to the nape of the neck. The grey hat has a sprig of heather tucked into a purple ribbon circling the base of the crown, the brim offering protection from sun and rain for a skin remarkably free of wrinkles. My coat is the same colour as the hat, fastening at the neck, a single line of buttons to a hem meeting black boots above the ankles. And just a suggestion of lavender water. People, dogs, fragments of conversation ebb and flow around me, ripples of lace-capped sea lapping a rock. Sometimes somebody brings a ladder-backed chair out for me, or even a rug to put over my knees.

Today, however, I'm standing, and asking Mr Ellis about his vegetables as if we were the only two people under this cloudy September sky. Mr Ellis shakes his head. Blackfly are winning the battle for the beans.

'That's such a pity,' I tell him. 'The ones you gave me the other week were so sweet.'

Mr Ellis has more bad news. Some of the carrots have rotted. I tell him about my brother in Australia who has lost most of his land to fire.

Mr Ellis seems encouraged to find there is somebody worse off than he is. 'What did he do?' he asks me.

'There will be some compensation from the government.' I think some more. 'The land will recover. Terrible to watch it happen though. Makes one feel so helpless, insignificant.'

'The noise and smell of burning,' Mr Ellis adds. 'Like when my brother's hay rick took fire up Lytchett.' He purses his mouth in sympathy. 'I'll have another go at the blackfly. We might get a second crop for Mrs Ellis to salt down.'

A couple of yards away, Joe Budden is eyeing two pals kicking a stone. Raven hair grows in all directions from the centre of Joe's scalp. Long lashes fringe eyes the same colour: some Mediterranean blood there? The only Budden brother still at home. The other three volunteered last month as soon as Kitchener's call went out, although I'm sure the youngest was under age. Fiery Reverend Fletcher blessed all the Wimborne lads, with everybody cheering and throwing wayside flowers at them as they marched off. They'll be home by Christmas, people are saying. Give Fritz a punch on the nose then back in time for plum pudding.

Joe turns towards me.

'Hello, Joe,' I greet him. 'Saturday today.'

He nods, blinks. An unpromising start, statements of the obvious, can lead in amazing directions. Once he told me they had learnt about Captain Cook at school, and I talked about aborigines.

'Football later,' Joe volunteers now.

'Playing or watching?'

'Playing. Tom's boots. My turn.'

Tom is another youngest son. The town is haemorrhaging its youth, leaving us with boys and old men.

'What time? So I can think about you.'

'Three. Our Will sent a letter,' Joe adds. 'They're in Lincolnshire.' Joe pronounces the three syllables as if they are a skill not quite mastered. 'Training. Mam's real proud. Hey!' he calls to the two kicking the stone and they're off into West Row.

Will Budden brought me up from the station in the dog cart in June, with my carpet bag and the Remington in its case, past hedgerows plump with summer, and I thought: yes, this'll do nicely. I stayed at the King's Head that first night.

Mr Beale is lingering, as though he can't decide, or has forgotten, where to go. He pads towards me, raises his cap. 'Afternoon, ma'am. Taking the air again?'

The quarterjack is striking the hour, followed by five tolls, as I go indoors. I think of Joe Budden and wonder if he scored a goal. I remember Mr Beale and his stale tobacco smell, husky voice, still mourning the loss of his dog after six weeks. But it is Australia that fills my mind as I climb the stairs. Australia ... *crackle of bush fire ... fumes of burning eucalyptus shooting up the nostrils, exploding.* Inside my room I close the door and stand against it, deep breath; pull off coarse woollen gloves and gold-rimmed spectacles ... *sweetness of burning flesh: wallabies, crocodiles, creatures caught in the onslaught.*

I return the gloves to their drawer, spectacles in a red and blue quilted case on top. I remove the hat and wig, lay them next to the gloves, run fingers through thick bobbed hair, unbutton the coat, wool rough against my fingers, hang it on the rail behind a faded crimson curtain ... *eucalyptus ... acrid?*

I sit on the edge of the bed, ease off boots and socks ... *eucalyptus ... can something smell hot?* This scene that has been long forming in my mind reaches out to me now like a lover, yet with a new urgency, to get it all finished and go. By Christmas? To Hettie's mincemeat and roast suckling pig? 'Don't come back till it's done,' my sisters instructed, hugging me goodbye, Wimborne somewhere with a station, a pinprick on a map.

Eight chapters in three months.

Seated at the table by the window I wiggle bare feet, look out at the emptying Corn Market. I plump the cushion behind my back, roll a sheet of paper into the Remington, turn the carriage four times, type in the middle of the line:

## CHAPTER NINE

*Eucalyptus was never meant to be burnt. Jed wondered if its clinging heat, acrid stench, would ever leave his nostrils ...*

**The End**