

Here on the Home Front

By Rodney Williams

Ever since her best friend Grace's brother was killed at Lone Pine, Elsie Schickert had felt heartsick about Australian troops fighting at Gallipoli. Not to mention how lonely she'd been since Grace's parents had moved their daughter up to Sydney . . .

The schoolgirl broke from reading news about the war when she noticed a crowd building up outside her parents' cake-shop. There was nothing in tonight's *Melbourne Herald* about trade unionists planning to march. She had no idea why rough-looking men were gathering here in Carlton, on such a hot night. It was another thing to wonder about, apart from why her mother was so excited about some visitor arriving at half past six.

The shop's clock showed 6:00 p.m.—closing-time at hotels. Humid for early December, it was Thursday too: pay-day for those workers still lucky enough to have a job. Despite the heat, the men outside wore army great-coats.

When her father trotted downstairs, bound for his storeroom, Elsie noted how much his mood had brightened. Before today's delivery of flour, he had been anxious about supplies, after troubles at the docks, plus shortages of grain, not to mention the worries faced by half his German



friends.

Naturalised ten years ago, George Schickert could not be treated as an alien, thrown into an internment camp without charge, under the federal government's tough new laws. While half the European folk in Melbourne seemed to gather here at the bakery to share their woes, today Elsie's mother Caroline had shooed them out right on 5:30—even the old Austrian woman, in tears because someone outside had just booted her dachshund and called that vicious kick “a patriotic act.”

Suddenly the men on Elgin Street were

shouting. When Elsie put her ear to the glass, fists pounded against her cheekbone. Someone spat at her father's name. Elsie turned away sharply as another fellow fumbled with the fly to his trousers.

Perspiring, she pinched herself. Ouch! She was wide awake, all right—no bad dream, but still a nightmare . . .

Sticks were belting the veranda-posts.

Hey, Schickert, show a different kinda guts, ya weak fat prick! came one challenge. *Pop out for a chat . . . With us fair-dinkum boys . . . Here on the home front . . . In a country what's always been ours—never yours,* came another.

Elsie spluttered. The Victorian government had invited her father to migrate twenty years before, with his skills as a baker in short supply. Then he'd married an Australian girl, with English parents, from Bendigo. What more could the mob outside want, besides Australian citizenship? Well, George Schickert had that too!

Seen our best mates killed, we have . . . By your pal Johnny Turk . . . Helpin' out ya rat-faced consins, Karl and Klaus and Kurt . . .

Only recently had Caroline confided in Elsie about George's darkest day. Prussian troops had beaten him senseless, years before. His only crime was buying Bratwurst sausages for his mother, well before curfew. They had left him lying on cobblestones in Berlin, like mince-meat himself.

Can't wait to get ta that Western Front . . . Kill a few Huns . . .

She counted slowly to ten, as Grace had

taught her to do, when schoolyard bullies chanted their taunts: *El-sie the En-e-my; Lick-it Schickert; Daughter of the Hun with a Kaiser Bun.*

With the shop-door bolted tight, she wedged a chair beneath its handle. Checking the day's takings had been cleared from the till, Elsie yelled up the stairwell. "Mother!"

Louder hooting outside was the only reply: *Ya send our cash to ya Kaiser . . . Never give no local lad no job . . . Blokes outta work . . . Cost o' livin' risin' . . . Poor bastards forced ta join the army . . . Or starve . . .*

"Father!"

Boche! . . . Spy! . . . Scum!

A street-poet started reciting:

This Hun the baker—

What a miser—

Sends our pennies

To the Kaiser!

Elsie knew her father had not wired one shilling back to Germany since his parents had died. He never had sixpence to spare for a worker's wages. That ha'penny in her purse looked as lonely as Elsie felt.

She wished she had a sister: even a brother would do. Maybe once she put age thirteen behind her, life would get luckier . . .

Smack! Something struck the shop-window. Like a bullet.

"Help!"

When her parents rushed in, Elsie howled with relief—

—only to squeal when a rock cracked the plate-glass.

A policeman arrived just in time, yet he did not clap a single man into handcuffs. Instead he simply clapped. Elsie was dumbstruck; he had actually given the mob a round of applause.

While Elsie and her mother clutched each other, weeping, the wolf-pack outside howled.

George Schickert stood rooted to the spot, his shoes nailed to the floorboards.

When men pulled projectiles from their pockets, Elsie saw why these soldier boys wore heavy coats on so hot a night.

Clenching his fists, as if kneading dough bound with glue, George bellowed, “Polizei! Hilfe!”

Elsie barely stopped herself from swearing. “Don’t dare speak that language, Father!”

“If you want police to help,” hissed his wife, “use words they understand!”

“Do we haf buckets?” George demanded. “Dey could set fire to de building!”

“Our front window’s gone, Father!” Elsie shouted. “Shut up!”

“See how drunk they are!” Caroline pleaded. “Don’t give them ideas!”

When one last fragment of glass bearing the name of their business—*Schickert’s Cakes*—crashed to the ground, the mob gave a cheer.

Red-faced intruders surged forward. Ducking sweaty heads through the opening, they paused over the window-sill. Across the wreckage, twenty drunken men leered at the pair of women,

backed by just one man.

Elsie shrieked, her scream fit to loosen bladders—free up bowels.

The invaders appeared dumb-struck. Having braved no-man’s-land, they stalled at the enemy’s trench, as if awaiting further orders.

Pinned against the back wall, George Schickert might have been facing a firing-squad. “Da Kaiser, he’s no king of mine!”

When Caroline advanced like a bantam hen, Elsie stepped forward too, tight against her mother’s wing.

A policeman arrived just in time, yet he did not clap a single man into handcuffs. Instead he simply clapped. Elsie was dumbstruck; he had actually given the mob a round of applause.

“Constable Jackson.” He bowed. “So what’s the trouble?”

Despite a kick from her mother, Elsie took another step, clearing her throat, but their man-in-blue ignored her.

“Schickert’s his name, eh? German, then? So that’s the problem!” The copper chuckled. “Well, I reckon youse blokes are shickered yourselves!”

Winning the mob over with a wink, Constable Jackson ushered them around the corner into Lygon Street, free to laugh and boast. Elsie could

not credit it—this so-called officer of the law had made no effort to hear complaints or take note of damage.

“Mother, Father, what’s wrong with you?” she screeched. “Chase after them! Press charges!”

The only reply came from the street-poet’s chant, ringing out again across a hot Carlton night:

This Hun the baker—

What a miser—

Sends our pennies

To the Kaiser!

While her parents shrugged, then embraced, Elsie shuddered.

Debris lay everywhere. Shattered glass. Stone, brick and tile. Splintered wood and rusty metal. Lead sinkers. Ball-bearings. Bolts.

Topped off by the stench of a drunkard’s urine.

After transferring left-over cakes to sealed cupboards—safe from looters, rodents and heat—Elsie made her first trip to the rubbish bins out the back. Despite the temperature, her father insisted she wear gloves.

With tomcats waging a second putrid-smelling turf-war out in the lane, Elsie knew her family would not win their own fight to stake a claim here—it made no sense for the Schickerts to stay in Carlton.

As they tacked a tarpaulin over the window-frame, Elsie’s parents agreed they had to leave.

Only three questions remained.

Could their shop attract a buyer now?

On what terms?

And where might they move instead?

Elsie’s mother stifled a sob. She had found someone interested in buying them out; he was the visitor she had expected at 6:30 . . .

Fixing a supper of lettuce and German sausage, Caroline sniffed yet again: “Call it Belgian sausage, remember!”

With the aroma of her father’s baking still sweet upstairs—such a contrast to the stink of piss down below, front and back, man and cat—Elsie trudged towards her bedroom at the rear, her own question left unspoken . . .

At a new school, could she hope to find another friend half as true as Grace?

Unable to bear the sight of their son’s empty bedroom, her friend’s parents had moved to Sydney to live with relatives. Elsie knew by heart the last verse of the poem which ended Grace’s latest letter:

So now there are Lone Pines—

Each on their own—

In Melbourne and Sydney

As well as Gallipoli.

Snuffing out her candle, Elsie heard that street-poet’s verse once more, this time from the lane.

This Hun the baker—

What a miser—

Sends our pennies

To the Kaiser!

Smash! Clatter. Sharp pains in her cheek, her scalp. Warm blood on her fingertips.

Yet again, she knew she was not dreaming—
there was no need to pinch herself.

This time it was Elsie Schickert's bedroom
window which had been shattered by a brick.

Image: "[Soldiers marching in the street at Macks](#)" (Public Domain) by [Aussie~mobs](#).