



Henry Lawson

*When I was
King and
Other Verses*

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When I was King and Other Verses



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[The Cross-Roads](#)

[When I was King](#)

[The Author's Farewell to the Bushmen](#)

[From the Bush](#)

[Heed Not](#)

[The Bush Girl](#)

['G.S.,' or the Fourth Cook](#)

[Jack Cornstalk](#)

[The Men Who Made Australia](#)

[The Bulletin Hotel](#)

['Sacred to the Memory of "Unknown"](#)

[The Shearers](#)

['Knocking Around'](#)

[The Shearer's Dream](#)

[The Never-Never Country](#)

[With Dickens](#)

[The Things We Dare Not Tell](#)

[The Drums of Battersea](#)

[As Far as Your Rifles Cover](#)

[Gipsy Too](#)

[The Wander-Light](#)

[Genoa](#)

[The Tracks That Lie by India](#)

[Say Good-Bye When Your Chum is Married](#)

[The Separation](#)

[Ruth](#)

[The Cliffs](#)

[Bourke](#)

[The Stringy-Bark Tree](#)

[The Bush Fire](#)

[The Bill of the Ages](#)

[Waratah and Wattle](#)

[My Land and I](#)

[The Men Who Live It Down](#)

[When Your Pants Begin to Go](#)

[Robbie's Statue](#)

[The Ballad of the Elder Son](#)

[The Pride That Comes After](#)

[A Voice from the City](#)

[To-Morrow](#)

[The Light on the Wreck](#)

[The Secret Whisky Cure](#)

[The Alleys](#)

[The Scamps](#)

[Break o' Day](#)

[The Women of the Town](#)

[The Afterglow](#)

[Written Out](#)

[New Life, New Love](#)

[The King and Queen and I](#)

[To Hannah](#)

[The Water Lily](#)

[Barta](#)

[To Jim](#)

[The Drunkard's Vision](#)

[In the Storm That is to Come](#)
[Australian Engineers](#)
[The Drovers](#)
[Those Foreign Engineers](#)
[Skaal](#)
[The Firing-Line](#)
[Riding Round the Lines](#)
[When the Bear Comes Back Again](#)
[The Little Czar](#)
[The Vanguard](#)
[And the Bairns Will Come](#)
[The Heart of Australia](#)
[The Good Samaritan](#)
[Will Yer Write It Down for Me?](#)
[Andy's Return](#)
[Pigeon Toes](#)
[On the Wallaby](#)
[The Brass Well](#)
[Eureka](#)
[The Last Review](#)
[As Good as New](#)
[THE END](#)

The Cross-Roads

[Table of Contents](#)

*Oncemore I write a line to you,
While darker shadows fall;
Dear friends of mine who have been true,
And steadfast through it all.
If I have written bitter rhymes,
With many lines that halt,
And if I have been false at times
It was not all my fault.*

*To Heaven's decree I would not bow,
And I sank very low—
The bitter things are written now,
And we must let them go.
But I feel softened as I write;
The better spirit springs,
And I am very sad to-night
Because of many things.*

*The friendships that I have abused,
The trust I did betray,
The talents that I have misused,
The gifts I threw away.
The things that did me little good,
And—well my cheeks might burn—
The kindly letters that I should
Have answered by return.*

*But you might deem them answered now,
And answered from my heart;*

*And injured friends will understand
'Tis I who feel the smart.
But I have done with barren strife
And dark imaginings,
And in my future work and life
Will seek the better things.*

When I was King

[Table of Contents](#)

The secondtime I lived on earth
Was several hundred years ago;
And—royal by my second birth—
I know as much as most men know.
I was a king who held the reins
As never modern monarch can;
I was a king, and I had brains,
And, what was more, I was a man!

Called to the throne in stormy times,
When things were at their very worst,
I had to fight—and not with rhymes—
My own self and my kindred first;
And after that my friends and foes,
And great abuses born of greed;
And when I'd fairly conquered those,
I ruled the land a king indeed.

I found a deal of rottenness,
Such as in modern towns we find;
I camped my poor in palaces
And tents upon the plain behind.
I marked the hovels, dens and drums
In that fair city by the sea.
And burnt the miles of wretched slums
And built the homes as they should be.

I stripped the baubles from the State,
And on the land I spent the spoil;
I hunted off the sullen great,

And to the farmers gave the soil.
My people were their own police;
My courts were free to everyone.
My priests were to preach love and peace;
My Judges to see justice done.

I'd studied men and studied kings,
No crawling cant would I allow;
I hated mean and paltry things,
As I can hate them even now.
A land of men I meant to see,
A strong and clean and noble race—
No subject dared kneel down to me,
But looked his king straight in the face

Had I not been a king in fact,
A king in council-hall and tent,
I might have let them crawl and act
The courtier to their heart's content;
But when I called on other kings,
And saw men kneel, I felt inclined
To gently tip the abject things
And kick them very hard behind.

My subjects were not slaves, I guess,
But though the women in one thing—
A question 'twas of healthy dress—
Would dare to argue with their king
(I had to give in there, I own,
Though none denied that I was strong),
Yet they would hear my telephone
If anything went very wrong.

I also had some poets bright—
Their songs were grand, I will allow—
They were, if I remember right,
About as bad as bards are now.
I had to give them best at last,
And let them booze and let them sing;
As it is now, so in the past,
They'd small respect for gods or king.

I loved to wander through the streets—
I carried neither sword nor dirk—
And watch the building of my fleets,
And watch my artisans at work.
At times I would take off my coat
And show them how to do a thing—
Till someone, clucking in his throat,
Would stare and gasp, 'It is the king!'

And I would say, 'Shut up, you fools!
Is it for this my towns I burn?
You don't know how to handle tools,
And by my faith you'll have to learn!'
I was a king, but what of that?
A king may warble in the spring
And carry eggs home in his hat,
Provided that he/isa king.

I loved to stroll about the town
With chums at night, and talk of things,
And, though I chanced to wear the crown,
My friends, by intellect, were kings.
When I was doubtful, then I might
Discuss a matter quietly,

But when I felt that I was right
No power on earth could alter me!
And now and then it was no sin
Nor folly to relax a bit—
I'd take my friends into an inn
And call for wine and pay for it.
And then of many things we'd clack
With loosened tongues and visions clear—
I often heard behind my back
The whispered 'Peace, the king is here!'

The women harped about a queen,
I knew they longed to have a court
And flaunt their feathers on the scene,
But hitherto I'd held the fort.
My subjects wanted me, no doubt,
To give the throne a son and heir—
(There were some little kings about,
But that was neither here nor there).

I'd no occasion for a wife—
A queen as yet was not my plan;
I'd seen a lot of married life—
My sire had been a married man.
'A son and heir be hanged!' I said—
'How dare you ask for such a thing,
'You fight it out when I am dead
'And let the best man be the king!'

'Your Majesty, we love you well!'
A candid friend would say to me—
'But there be tales that people tell
'Unfitted to thy dignity'—

'My dignity be damned!' I'd say,
'Bring me no women's chattering!
'I'll be a man while yet I may—
'When trouble comes I'll be a king!

I'd kept my kingdom clean and strong
While other kingdoms were like ours—
I had no need to brook a wrong,
I feared not all the rotten Powers
I did not eat my heart out then,
Nor feebly fight in verse or prose
I'd take five hundred thousand men
To argue matters with my foes!

It thrilled me through, the mighty tramp
Of armèd men, the thundering cheer—
The pregnant whisper through the camp
At dead of night: 'The King is here!'
And though we paid for victory
On some fields that were hard to hold,
The faith my soldiers had in me
Oft strengthened mine a hundredfold.

I'd chat with soldiers by the fires
On rocky heights and river banks,
I'd seek the brains that war requires,
And take my captains from the ranks.
And so, until the storm was by,
And came the peace just war can bring,
I bore me so that men might cry
With all their hearts, 'God Save the King.'

*When I was king the world was wide,
And I was strong and I was free.*

*I knew no hatred, knew no pride,
No envy and no treachery.
I feared no lies. I feared no truth,
Nor any storm that time might bring.
I had my love, I had my youth,
The world was mine when I was king.*

Peace came at last—and strange is Fate—
The women begged just once alone
To see me robed in royal state
And seated on my father's throne.
I thought, 'Shall I this boon deny?'
And said—and 'twas a paltry thing:
'I'll show the fools just once that I
'Can look, as well as be, a king.'

They dusted out the castle old,
And from the closet and the chest
They dug the jewels set in gold—
The crown and robes and all the rest.
They came with eyes like stars of night,
With diamonds set in raven hair,
They came with arms and bosoms white—
And, Oh my God! but one was fair!

They dressed me as the kings had been,
The ancient royal purple spread,
And one that was to be my queen,
She placed the circlet on my head.
They pressed their hearts and bowed to me,
They knelt with arms uplifted all.
I felt the rush of vanity—
The pride that goes before the fall.

.....

And then the banquet and the wine
With Satan's music and the glance
Of siren eyes. Those captains mine
Were reeling in the maddening dance:
A finger writing on the wall,
While girls sang as the angels sing—
A drunken boaster in the hall,
The fool that used to be a king.

I rose again—no matter how—
A woman, and a deeper fall—
I move amongst my people now
The most degraded of them all.
But, if in centuries to come,
I live once more and claim my own,
I'll see my subjects blind and dumb
Before they set me on a throne.

The Author's Farewell to the Bushmen

[Table of Contents](#)

Some carry their swags in the Great North-West,
Where the bravest battle and die,
And a few have gone to their last long rest,
And a few have said: Good-bye!
The coast grows dim, and it may be long
Ere the Gums again I see;
So I put my soul in a farewell song
To the chaps who barracked for me.

Their days are hard at the best of times,
And their dreams are dreams of care—
God bless them all for their big soft hearts,
And the brave, brave grins they wear!
God keep me straight as a man can go,
And true as a man may be!
For the sake of the hearts that were always so,
Of the men who had faith in me!

And a ship-side word I would say, you chaps
Of the blood of the Don't-give-in!
The world will call it a boast, perhaps—
But I'll win, if a man can win!
And not for gold nor the world's applause—
Though ways to the end they be—
I'll win, if a man might win, because
Of the men who believed in me.

From the Bush

[Table of Contents](#)

*The Channel fog has lifted—
And see where we have come!
Round all the world we've drifted,
A hundred years from 'home.'
The fields our parents longed for—
Ah! we shall ne'er know how—
The wealth that they were wronged for
We'll see as strangers now!*

The Dovercliffs have passed on—
In morning light aglow—
That our fathers looked their last on
A weary time ago.
Now grin, and grin your bravest!
We need be strong to fight;
For you go home to picture
And I go home to write.

Hold up your head in England,
Tread firm on London streets;
We come from where the strong heart
Of all Australia beats!
Hold up your head in England
However poor you roam!
For no men are your betters
Who never sailed from home!

From a hundred years of hardships—
'Tis ours to tell the cost—
From a thousand miles of silence

Where London would be lost;
From where the glorious sunset
On sweeps of mulga glows—
Ah! we know more than England,
And more than Europe knows!

Hold up your head in London,
However poor you come,
For no man is your better
Who never sailed from home!
Our 'home' and foreign fathers,
Where none but men dared go,
Have done more for the White Man
Than England e'er shall know!

Heed Not

[Table of Contents](#)

Heednot the cock-sure tourist,
Seeing with English eyes;
Stroked at the banquet table
Still, with the old stock lies—
Pet of a social circle,
Guest in a garden fair—
Free of the first-class carriage—
He learns no Australia there.

Heed not the Southern humbugs
By the first saloons who come—
From his work in the wide, hot scrub-lands
The Australian goes not home.
Give them the toadies' knighthood,
Fit for the souls they've got;
Fear not to shame Australia
For Australia knows them not.

Heed not the Sydney 'dailies,'
Naught for the land they do;
Heed not the Melbourne street crowd,
For they know no more than you!
Pent in the coastal cities,
Still on the old-world track—
They know naught of Australia,
Of the heart of the great Out-Back.

But wait for the voice that gathers
Strength by the western creeks!
Heed ye the Out-Back shearers—

List when the Great Bush speaks!
Heed ye the black-sheep, working
His own salvation free—
And Oh! heed ye the sons of the exiles
When they speak of the things to be!

The Bush Girl

[Table of Contents](#)

So you rode from the range where your brothers select,
Through the ghostly, grey Bush in the dawn—
You rode slowly at first, lest her heart should suspect
That you were so glad to be gone;
You had scarcely the courage to glance back at her
By the homestead receding from view,
And you breathed with relief as you rounded the spur,
For the world was a wide world to you.

Grey eyes that grow sadder than sunset or rain,
Fond heart that is ever more true,
Firm faith that grows firmer for watching in vain—
She'll wait by the slip-rails for you.

Ah! the world is a new and a wide one to you,
But the world to your sweetheart is shut,
For a change never comes to the lonely Bush homes
Of the stockyard, the scrub, and the hut;
And the only relief from its dulness she feels
When the ridges grow softened and dim,
And away in the dusk to the slip-rails she steals
To dream of past hours 'with him.'

Do you think, where, in place of bare fences, dry creeks,
Clear streams and green hedges are seen—
Where the girls have the lily and rose in their cheeks,
And the grass in mid-summer is green—
Do you think, now and then, now or then, in the whirl
Of the town life, while London is new,

Of the hut in the Bush and the freckled-faced girl
Who waits by the slip-rails for you?

Grey eyes that are sadder than sunset or rain,
Bruised heart that is ever more true,
Fond faith that is firmer for trusting in vain—
She waits by the slip-rails for you.