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A Backblocker's Pleasure Trip

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CHAPTER I.
An Early Start— A Milkmaid of the Interior—A Digger's Home.

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At certain seasons our several Governments combine to run excursion trains from Broken Hill to Sydney (and vice-versa), via Adelaide and Melbourne. I sampled the excursion at the time the Duke of York was visiting Australia. A lot of people were going east then to see Royalty. I had no appointment with him myself; in fact, I wasn't going down to see the Duke at all—nor even the Duchess. The prolonged drought of that period, with its heat and flies and thirst and duststorms, was getting monotonous, and the cheap excursion decided me that I wanted a change of climate.

Being at Tibooburra, 200 miles from the railway station, I had to start early to catch the express. I started three weeks before hand. This was to allow time to recover from the awful coach trip before beginning the long train journey.

It was not a mere holiday trip with me; I was going for good. There was nothing about Tibooburra to hold the affections of one who had known the regions of great forests and perennial streams. It was a small town, with only one street; but there were three hotels in it, and it seemed to do a fairly good business for a far inland town that was surrounded with endless miles of emptiness. It was a picturesque little spot, in what the coastal people call the Land of Sunset, noticeable particularly for the numerous huge cone-shaped piles of stones or gibbers around it, and

for the immense flocks of goats that dotted the immediate landscape.

Turn where you would, Billy and Nanny and the kids were always in evidence. They mooched through the street, and they slept on the footpath, indifferent to passers-by. On a dark night the passer-by sometimes passed over a prostrate form into the mud. They could be seen like mere specks on the distant flat, and posed in all manner of attitudes on the rocky hillsides, with one here and there silhouetted against the sky line, standing like a living statue on the topmost rock of a lofty pinnacle. It was the home of the goat; for there were no other animals to be seen, excepting an odd horse and a stray dog here and there. The sparse herbage and the rugged nature of the local pasture did not support cows. Goat milk, goat meat and even goat butter were common items in the family bill of fare.

Here the milkmaid was a familiar figure in the street. Where nearly everybody who had time to attend to the animals kept goats, there was only room for one in the dairying business. She was about 16, the main support of a widowed mother. She did her round on foot, carrying a quart measure and a billycan; but a bare-legged boy accompanied her with a home-made goat-cart, on which the bulk of the milk was carried. Her principal customers were the hotels and stores; and there were a few houses outside the "main street" which the little milk-cart visited regularly, rattling over the broken ground and among the rock heaps on a narrow track of its own. She was truly a picture of the great, dry, central region, this little milkmaid. Her turn out brought a smile from visitors; but nobody else seemed to notice

anything unusual about it. Casual customers met the milk cart with their jugs, and toddlers looked for a noggin when she came along.

At milking time you saw her and the mother and two small boys in the midst of a flock, going busily from one goat to another with their cans. They milked them anywhere in the yard, and when the work was over the herd was turned loose among the gibbers. Now and again one was kept back to be killed for meat, a task in which the girl was again the chief actor. Mustering the flock was an interesting process. They mingled with a thousand other goats, most of which bore a very striking resemblance to each other to a stranger. There would be a score of juveniles goat-hunting at once, running along the narrow valleys, climbing up and down the piled-up rocks, searching every nook, and roaming over the broken flats, calling their pets, and drafting them out of the mixed mobs. They all had names for their goats; and they all knew them individually. The little dairymaid owned about 300. In her little world the goat was not only the family sustenance, but took the place of the cow in all the other homes of the neighbourhood.

I carried away with me one other vivid picture of that place, the home of a digger's wife; for here I picked up John Jovius Muggs, a shrewd battler, who was also going "down below." He was some distant relation of hers; and he called me over to help to recover a poddy foal that had slipped into an old shaft.

The dwelling, like many another around it, was a patchwork structure, built into an indentation in a huge pile of rocks. In this position it had to conform somewhat to the

natural outline of the limited site. It was neither square, oblong, nor round, and the visitor had no idea of its dimensions until he got inside. You had to stoop to enter, but inside you could straighten yourself out and admire the craftsmanship of the architect. The walls were partly of immovable rock and partly of hessian; the floor was a mixture of soft granite and natural cement; and in front, some distance from the verandah, was a high wind-break of cane grass. The kitchen was in a wide angle, at the side, the spacious fireplace being also in part built by nature, and in part by the digger with rough stones and pug.

Nearly all the furniture was home-made. Packing-cases were transformed into tables, easy chairs, chests of drawers, cupboards, dressers, shelves and beds. The sofa or lounge, covered with cretonne, was fashioned of the same rough material, padded with horsehair. The cooking was done much in the same way as in a camp or a bushman's hut; but there was no floor-scrubbing and no window cleaning.

Sometimes in the afternoon the woman visited a neighbour's place, planted among other piles of rocks, and invisible until you got near it. Sometimes she took the children along the little flats and gullies, prospecting in the alluvial. In these rambles, especially after rain, they picked up many specks of gold, and sometimes discovered a payable claim for the old man. At night "mother" sat at the table, blowing the black sand from the gold that "father" had obtained during the day, before bottling it and putting it away for Saturday.

A little, oblong-shaped hole near the house showed the source of their water supply. It was only a few feet deep, and the water in it looked only enough to last a day or two. But it never gave out. Close by each of the neighbours' places was a similar soakage. Besides being used for household purposes, the water was run in little channels through a cultivated plot; in another angle of the rock-heap, which supplied them with vegetables and fruit. The rock-heap was their own little mountain, over which their goats climbed and browsed, and in the nooks and corners of which their fowls scratched and planted their nests. It was a home suited to the hot, dusty, western clime, where people live under different conditions from those of other parts of the State. It was the typical digger's home in the region known as Mount Browne.

When I was called over by Mr. Muggs, the woman was assisting to hoist the foal from the shaft, which was about 12ft. deep. A tripod and blocking tackle were fixed up over it; and having fastened a rope round the foal, we hauled it up. Then, while the woman and I hung on to the rope, Mr. Muggs got behind the foal to shove it clear of the shaft. He had no sooner put his hands against it than the suspended animal struggled violently, and kicked him backwards into the shaft. We couldn't run to his assistance, or to inquire if he had sustained any damage. We had to hang on all we could; and meanwhile Mr. Muggs watched the struggling beast from below, dreading every moment that we would let it drop on top of him.

Luckily, the digger came home for his lunch, and in a moment or two we were relieved of the poddy. Then we

hauled up Mr. Muggs, who was mainly suffering from the terror that had hung over him; after which we had just time to get lunch before boarding the coach for the long road.

CHAPTER II.
On an Old Diggings.

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Coaching through the lonely back country is not exhilarating. You travel all day, all night, all next day, all that night, and all the following day, by which time you are feeling rather tired of it. You are also feeling drowsy. You stop only for meals—which are sometimes 18 hours apart, to change horses, and at the sandhills.

Our first halt was at Warratta, a wayside pub, where we washed down some of the dust we had collected in climbing up and down many stony, saltbush hills; and our next the little town of Milparinka, which after more substantial refreshments and a ramble, we left at dusk.

Like Tibooburra, our starting point, Mount Browne, Warratta and Milparinka were all goldfields that had known better days in the long past, and still supported a good number of puddlers, dryblowers, fossickers and others.

A queer lot of human derelicts one meets on some of the old alluvial diggings. What answers to the description of good fossicking ground is the last haven of the inveterate digger when old age creeps upon him. Down the long river of life he has known many vicissitudes; like a coracle he has drifted through the rushes and whirls of the golden course, tearing wildly over rapids and tumbling over falls; buffeted among the rocks, and stranded awhile in the shallows to float again into calm waters, through little eddies and ripples, and at last to drift out of the running stream into a by-wash and a dead end. That is the fossicking ground as

the old men know it, where all the excitement of a rushing digger's life is gone and done with. There remains only the necessity of scratching around for an existence, with the faint hope, which really never entirely dies in any digger, of striking a stray nugget or a rich pocket.

Some of them have handled fortunes in their time; in stirring days when life was young, and money was not valued, and was parted with as quickly as it came. In the neighbourhood of Mount Browne was one who was known as Bendigo. He was very nearly a centenarian; bent, wrinkled, and toothless, but still with energy and independence enough to potter about with pick and shovel. He got his nickname from the fact that his conversation usually bristled with references to the big Victorian field. He made his first pile on Bendigo, and he made many a good rise afterwards, at one time being possessed of £12,000.

When I first saw him he stood at the corner of the street, carefully searching the pockets of his patched clothes, and wearing a deeply thoughtful expression, as if he were trying to recollect what he had done with his last sixpence. The pockets turning out all duffers, he shuffled resignedly back to his camp, which happened then to be a hessian hut, the home of a man who worked at anything in the district, and did a bit of mining when there was nothing else to do. Bendigo had no abiding place that he could call his own. There were several men who had small dwellings on the field, and who were much of the year working away from it, at shearing sheds and elsewhere. There were others, too, who could not work their claims during the long, dry spells for want of water. They were not content, like the old chaps,

to get a couple of pennyweights a week until rain came, and they left home to seek other employment.

As one of these went out, Bendigo walked in, taking possession of the hut and utensils, and sometimes any tools that were there. Bendigo did not always possess a working kit. He couldn't obtain necessaries on trust; and when hard up he had to sell his kit or leave it as security. He had no mining claim either. He wandered about, working wherever he could find shelter, and especially where there chanced to be a deserted soakage. When the owner of the hut returned and temporarily inconvenienced him by turning him out, he looked for some reward for having acted as caretaker.

In the same locality was a hatter, who was popularly known as Dirty Peter. He was a dryblower, and no local evidence was adducible that he had ever washed either himself or his clothes. His name certainly suited his appearance. I often noticed his humpy, for it was one that had some eye arresting peculiarities about it. It was partly a dugout, with a patchwork roof like a Chinaman's hovel, and a chimney some yards in the rear composed of a pile of rough stones, topped with a broken drainpipe. He descended into the dungeon by means of an arrangement that was partly a ladder and partly a staircase. A wall of stones and bushes enclosed the premises on three sides; the front was open, and the ground thickly pitted right up to the door with old shafts. A little track, a couple of feet wide, zigzagged among the gaping holes to the entrance of Pete's happy home. The shafts had been there since the days of the rush, and it was believed that Peter left them unfilled as a deterrent to evening visitors. He was a hard worker. Early

and late he was at it, picking, shovelling, and blowing the dry soil on the flat, always about the same place, year after year, and every day's end he was seen zigzagging home with a log of wood on his shoulder. What he made nobody knew. He never hung about town, even at race time or election time. There was one thing about Peter that made him talked about among the old brigade—he always had money, but he always looked and pretended to be hard up.

Then there was "Old Ned," an old age pensioner. He had a neat little hut, kept scrupulously clean, the path to which was also hemmed with shafts. He, too, was something of a recluse. All day he kept to his hut, for he had given up mining, and at night he emerged to prowl about the vicinage. He liked to keep a fire burning, where he sat and smoked, or absorbed any interesting literature he chanced to pick up; and as it was a long way to the mulga ridges, he visited the unguarded woodheaps at the back of the business places. If he heard anyone approaching from the opposite direction while making home with the fuel, he dropped it down a shaft, and returned for it later. His path was a short cut from town across the flat, and sometimes he had several interruptions in getting a log home. One night a digger came almost on to him as he was busy hauling a heavy piece out of a hole. Ned let it slip back quickly, and commenced to feel along the path with his hands. "Hulloa, there!" said the digger, "what's up." "I've lost my pipe," said Ned, continuing the search. The digger produced a box of matches, and was about to strike one to help, when Ned hurriedly interrupted: "It's all right, I've got it!" and

straightening up, he thrust a short, knobby stick between his teeth, and made a pretence of drawing through it.

Another curious character was Windyne, who was commonly known as Windy the Fossicker, and to some as Cranky Windy. He dwelt alone in a little slab hut that he had built in the centre of a square plot of ground, containing about five acres. He earned his nickname from the fact that he spent all his days fossicking about that selection. It was broken up from side to side and from end to end, hardly a vestige anywhere being left untouched. It had never panned out a colour, but that didn't discourage Windy. When he wasn't digging, or measuring with a tape, he was seen mooching about with a pick and shovel in one hand and a tattered map in the other. How many years he had been thus unprofitably employed nobody could recollect.

He was a very old man when I knew him, bald-headed, wrinkled, and watery eyed. He lived on a small remittance, which he said, would be paid to him by his loving relatives as long as he stayed away from them. I took refuge under his humble roof one rainy day, and whilst we sat over the fire he told me his story.

He and a mate had been digging together, and being on a good run of dribbling gold, which kept them going comfortably, they invested some of their spare cash in a Tattersall's sweep, and drew a winner. The sum was about £10,000, according to Windy. The storekeeper collected the money, and handed it over to Windy's mate, who stowed it away in their tent. That night, Windy, celebrating his elevation to fortune, was treating everybody he met in town, and wound up by assaulting the constable. Ordinarily

Windy was the most peaceful of citizens. His lapse cost him a month in the local lockup. He had been cooling his heels there about three weeks when he heard that his mate had been found dead in the tent. The only money that could be found was a couple of one pound notes in his pocket and some loose cash in a chamois bag under his pillow.

"He must have known he was dyin'," said Windy, "for he left me a rough chart—this old map 'ere that I've studied for ages and ages. There's one word underneath—'Buried'—with the last letter only half formed, as if he had a spasm or something just there, an' never went back to finish what he'd meant to write.

"After I got out I spent six months searchin' and diggin' in vain for the buried money. Then—for fear somebody else might start prospectin' in the locality—I took up this homestead selection. It's no good for anything, an' my good neighbors are convinced that I'm stark starin' mad for selectin' such a plot; but the map says the gold's hidden inside its boundaries. Lord knows, I've done a power o' diggin', but I haven't struck the colour of it yet. Sometimes I think I've put the house on it. If that's the case the house will have to shift. But there's a few little virgin spots on the estate I must try first. Likely enough it's in one of them; if it's not it's under the house; and if it's not under the house—well, then, I must have put the fence up wrong, an' left the fortune out in the bush. . . . It must be somewhere, that's sure. Blast old Bill; he couldn't take it with him, could he? It's not my way to say anything against the dead, but old Bill was always a fool of a feller with money. An' to snuff out like that without finishin' the d—— map, that's what gets over

me! . . . Anyhow"—concluding with a gleam of cheerful philosophy—"if I don't soon find it I won't want it."

CHAPTER III.
A Lost Coach—The Mail Girl —"Returning Exiles."

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When you are shut up at night in a rocking, rolling, rattling coach, packed for hour after hour in the form of a zigzag, even the heavy sandhill can be a welcome variation to the tedium of travel. On coming to one or the latter the horses pulled up of their own accord, and the driver peremptorily ordered all hands to get out. We got out and walked, and now and again we shoved and spoked the wheels, and otherwise worked our passage over the bars. We paid £6 each for this privilege.

We didn't mind walking over the sand. It was better to have it underfoot than to meet it whirling through the atmosphere in dense clouds. The scenery was like the weather—monotonous; and these little breaks were a relief. We did not grumble either when the coachdriver got lost at night, and we had to do some exploring with lamps and matches. It might delay us a few minutes, or a few hours—what matter? We were quite animated when we took our seats again. We exhibited scratches and bruises as proof that we found trees and other vegetation without the assistance of a guide; and we related how we discovered numerous small gullies, without injury and without breaking or losing the coach lamp.

We did lose the coach on one occasion. Everybody had gone road-hunting, and when the thoroughfare was located

and all hands had been summoned to the spot, we found that we had mislaid the conveyance. No light had been left to guide us, and the horses wouldn't answer a coo-ee like a lost passenger. They wouldn't make any sound at all. On that lone, benighted plain no team ever stood so still. So things looked serious for a while.

When we set out to recover it, it was surprising what a lot of things could look like a coach and horses. A small mulga tree and a colossal hill equally resembled it. One, in his eagerness to be the saviour of the party, would call out. "Here it is" and cause the rest to concentrate there before he ascertained that his discovery was a straggling shrub or a heap of roly polies. This circumstance was treated jocularly at first, but its repetition became exasperating.

I believe we found everything in the neighbourhood, including rabbit burrows, before we struck the vehicle. This happy event was brought about by a man falling over a clump of saltbush; he bumped so hard that the horses jumped and the rattle of the traces directed another man to the place.

The driver came in for some abuse—in asides—that night. Not for losing the road, but for leaving the team. The road across many level expanses was often invisible in daytime; it had been buried in a duststorm or blown away into the next State. A 20 mile plain, bare as a claypan, and showing no sign of a wheel mark, had to be crossed by dead reckoning. I like a wide road, but one that is 20 miles wide is a little too extensive.

On these far tracks the traveller noticed here and there a candle box or a biscuit tin nailed to a tree. There might be

no habitation visible from the road, but somebody lived not far away, somewhere through the timber or over the hills; and that receptacle, placed convenient for the coach driver, was the family mailbox, in which letters and papers were posted and delivered. Much else at times was deposited there besides mail matter. Mrs. Smith, for instance, sent along a sample of her birthday cake, or a jar or two of some jam she had made, to a distant friend. It was the custom, too, among settlers that when one killed a beast a fresh joint was sent to the nearest neighbour. Fresh meat was rare, for a beast, even half a beast, lasted an ordinary family a long while. So a joint from time to time was appreciated.

On some of the long stretches between boxes there were spots well known to the coach driver, which were marked only with a little bridle track running off at right angles to the coach road. Here the mail girl was met with. Sometimes she was riding, sometimes she drove down in a sulky or a single buggy. Almost invariably she was waiting at the spot when the coach arrived, either sitting on a horse, her hat tied down over her ears, or sitting on a log or by the road side. Here and there two mail girls met at the same spot, arriving from opposite directions. Sometimes a little romance was interwoven in those trips for the mail—when the party from the opposite way chanced to be a young man. The trips were longer then, perhaps, and longer, too, seemed the intervals between the Coach days.

"The returning exiles!" Said a passenger, in allusion to himself and companions, as the coach extended the dull, grey miles behind us, and the veil of haze was drawn over

the austere face of Tongowoko and its neighbouring counties.

The people of the eastern, southern and northern regions were wont to style that part the Gates of Purgatory, and term its inhabitants the exiles of Outback. But the speaker was not as happy as a stranger to that land of suprises would have expected; and one of the returning exiles, a lady, was crying—crying because she was leaving for ever the pregnant, brooding spaces where the sun goes down. They had gone to that corner to make money, with the intention of getting out of it again as speedily as possible; and subtly, unconsciously, the place had gripped them. Not with joy, but with a pang of regret, they saw the glinting rock-caps at Mount Browne disappear behind the obscuring curtain.

A more striking contrast to the cold, green isles beyond the Atlantic could hardly be imagined; yet English, Irish and Scots were scattered all over it, a great many of them in a position to purchase an estate in their native land, and to live well on the interest of their money for the rest of their days. But you couldn't drag them out of it. Australians, too, who had tasted the sweets of the coastal climbs, turned back, in spite of all the disadvantages, to that siren with the austere countenance, and burning tresses.

We said as much to the man who had called us "the returning exiles," and he closed the argument by saying they were mad. Two years afterwards he was carrying between Wilcannia and Warri Warri—the extreme corner; and carrying out there was about the most trying occupation he could have engaged in.

As a rule, the settler is a stickler for home. Many a one of middle age has never seen a train or a ship; many a one who has grown up and reared a family has never been 50 miles away from the selection where he was born; and there are old men in plenty in the heart of Australia, and nearer, who have never looked upon the sea. Though there are roving spirits among them, the average, even when in search of work, keep within certain limits like their native crows. When they go droving, on a journey of several hundred miles, they make straight for their old haunts on being paid off. At the same time there may be nothing to call them back but familiar squattages where they have worked, or a few mates they had worked with; no fixed home and no kindred, and never a pair of bright eyes to induce them to "turn their greys once more to the south"—or the west.

CHAPTER IV.
Social Life in the Backblocks.

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If you are nobody in the social world, and want to rise from obscurity now and again for a change, live in the backblocks—live at Milparinka, the place that has become a synonym in New South Wales for the outermost limit.

In big towns only people of distinction, people in high positions, and those who have gained renown by accident, influence or merit, are deemed worthy of mention in the social columns of the big newspapers. The doings of our leading society women, of the butterflies of fashion, are chronicled, however insignificant; and mostly they pertain to weddings, engagements, receptions, dog parties, and flitting from place to place. When Mr. Smith-Jones retires from duty, or departs for a new field of activity, he receives a eulogistic notice; and particulars of his send-off and the select circle who took part in it, or were among those present, are duly published; also Mrs. Smith-Jones' dress is described to the minutest detail when she graces the ballroom or the lawn at Randwick. Her housemaid may be more attractive; but that obscure young person is only noticed when she falls down stairs with extra violence, or narrowly escapes drowning while surf bathing. Neither is the engagement of Bill, the boundary rider, to the cook at Wild Dog Hotel referred to in print. He receives no flattering publicity, even when he marries the girl, though a bush wedding is often a highly interesting function. Bill is only mentioned when he breaks his neck, or does something

equally disastrous to himself or to somebody else. If, however, Bill came into a fortune, eloped with an heiress, or discovered a gold mine, the amount of advertisement he would receive all at once would make him blush.

In the country town distinctions are less rigidly drawn. An outbreak of snobbery only brings humiliation on the snob. Everybody's weddings are noticed in the local paper, and every bride, whatever her station in life, looks charming. The only difference is that the squatter's daughter gets more space than is allotted to pretty little Mary whose father helps to keep the roads in repair. An old resident of any decree is worthy of half a column or more when he dies. If he dies in an uncommon or sensational fashion, the editor rejoices, and spreads himself on the lamented demise. Even the dairyman gets a sympathetic paragraph when he loses Strawberry, though Strawberry may not have been any thing like a prize cow. There also Constable X. is a highly-esteemed citizen, whose movements are recorded with a laudatory pen. If, further, it becomes necessary to refer frequently to the lapses of the town drunk, it is done more in sorrow than in anger. The lives of the people are closely intermingled, and as the population to the square mile grows less the inhabitants merge more on a plane of equality.

The social life in these primeval parts is not a joy to those who have been used to the mad whirl and gaiety of cities. At first some aspects of it are amusing and entertaining; there is a freshness, novelty and picturesqueness about it all that pleases and thrills; but that soon wears off, and leaves behind it an atmosphere of deadly dullness. The bushman

and the bush maid are not conscious of any dullness; they haven't time, and their lives are too busy to know the meaning of ennui. In their natural element there is much to exercise the mind that is meaningless to the visitor.

The main events in the way of public entertainments are the grass-fed races, the hospital ball, and the cricket match. Some times there is a blackfellows' corroboree. For the rest, home resourcefulness and neighbourly cooperation keep the ball rolling in a spasmodic fashion. In a widely scattered community, afternoon tea parties are hardly possible. When one family visits another they set out early in the morning, and return late in the evening. At squattages visitors arrive at any time between midday and midnight, and stay till next morning; sometimes they stay a week. Among humbler folk, horses and vehicles are the means of locomotion, though many walk. They walk five or six miles for a few hours' gossip, or to attend a dance; they often walk miles after a horse before they start on their day's trip. Almost every gathering or function that eventuates demands a long walk.

What great walkers were the old bush mothers—the mothers we knew on the rivers where the big scrubs grew, when settlers were hewing daylight into the tangled vegetation and making initial clearances in the dense forests! What few horses the settlements boasted of were generally in the use of the men, and there was seldom a vehicle in their possession other than a heavy dray, which was mostly wanted for more necessary purposes than pleasure driving. Many farmers at the beginning had to be content with a slide. This at times was used as the family carriage, on which they glided over the landscape to town or