

Henry Lawson



*The Prose Works
of Henry Lawson
Volume II*

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Published by Good Press, 2022

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EAN 4066338090690

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Joe Wilson's Courtship

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There are many times in this world when a healthy boy is happy. When he is put into knickerbockers, for instance, and 'comes a man to-day,' as my little Jim used to say. When they're cooking something at home that he likes. When the 'sandy-blight' or measles breaks out amongst the children, or the teacher or his wife falls dangerously ill—or dies, it doesn't matter which—'and there ain't no school.' When a boy is naked and in his natural state for a warm climate like Australia, with three or four of his schoolmates, under the shade of the creek-oaks in the bend where there's a good clear pool with a sandy bottom. When his father buys him a gun, and he starts out after kangaroos or 'possums. When he gets a horse, saddle, and bridle, of his own. When he has his arm in splints or a stitch in his head— he's proud then, the proudest boy in the district.

I wasn't a healthy-minded, average boy: I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake, and grew up to be a Bushman, and didn't know what was the matter with me—or the world—but that's got nothing to do with it.

There are times when a man is happy. When he finds out that the girl loves him. When he's just married. When he's a lawful father for the first time, and everything is going on all right: some men make fools of themselves then—I know I did. I'm happy to-night because I'm out of debt and can see clear ahead, and because I haven't been easy for a long time.

But I think that the happiest time in a man's life is when he's courting a girl and finds out for sure that she loves him and hasn't a thought for any one else. Make the most of your courting days, you young chaps, and keep them clean, for they're about the only days when there's a chance of poetry and beauty coming into this life. Make the best of them and you'll never regret it the longest day you live. They're the days that the wife will look back to, anyway, in the brightest of times as well as in the blackest, and there shouldn't be anything in those days that might hurt her when she looks back. Make the most of your courting days, you young chaps, for they will never come again.

A married man knows all about it—after a while: he sees the woman world through the eyes of his wife; he knows what an extra moment's pressure of the hand means, and, if he has had a hard life, and is inclined to be cynical, the knowledge does him no good. It leads him into awful messes sometimes, for a married man, if he's inclined that way, has three times the chance with a woman that a single man has—because the married man knows. He is privileged; he can guess pretty closely what a woman means when she says something else; he knows just how far he can go; he can go farther in five minutes towards coming to the point with a woman than an innocent young man dares go in three weeks. Above all, the married man is more decided with women; he takes them and things for granted. In short he is— well, he is a married man. And, when he knows all this, how much better or happier is he for it? Mark Twain says that he lost all the beauty of the river when he saw it with a pilot's eye,— and there you have it.

But it's all new to a young chap, provided he hasn't been a young blackguard. It's all wonderful, new, and strange to him. He's a different man. He finds that he never knew anything about women. He sees none of woman's little ways and tricks in his girl. He is in heaven one day and down near the other place the next; and that's the sort of thing that makes life interesting. He takes his new world for granted. And, when she says she'll be his wife——!

Make the most of your courting days, you young chaps, for they've got a lot of influence on your married life afterwards—a lot more than you'd think. Make the best of them, for they'll never come any more, unless we do our courting over again in another world. If we do, I'll make the most of mine.

But, looking back, I didn't do so badly after all. I never told you about the days I courted Mary. The more I look back the more I come to think that I made the most of them, and if I had no more to regret in married life than I have in my courting days, I wouldn't walk to and fro in the room, or up and down the yard in the dark sometimes, or lie awake some nights thinking. . . . Ah well!

I was between twenty-one and thirty then: birthdays had never been any use to me, and I'd left off counting them. You don't take much stock in birthdays in the Bush. I'd knocked about the country for a few years, shearing and fencing and droving a little, and wasting my life without getting anything for it. I drank now and then, and made a fool of myself. I was reckoned 'wild'; but I only drank because I felt less sensitive, and the world seemed a lot saner and better and kinder when I had a few drinks: I loved

my fellow-man then and felt nearer to him. It's better to be thought 'wild' than to be considered eccentric or ratty. Now, my old mate, Jack Barnes, drank—as far as I could see—first because he'd inherited the gambling habit from his father along with his father's luck: he'd the habit of being cheated and losing very bad, and when he lost he drank. Till drink got a hold on him. Jack was sentimental too, but in a different way. I was sentimental about other people—more fool I!—whereas Jack was sentimental about himself. Before he was married, and when he was recovering from a spree, he'd write rhymes about 'Only a boy, drunk by the roadside', and that sort of thing; and he'd call 'em poetry, and talk about signing them and sending them to the *Town and Country Journal*. But he generally tore them up when he got better. The Bush is breeding a race of poets, and I don't know what the country will come to in the end.

Well. It was after Jack and I had been out shearing at Beenaway shed in the Big Scrubs. Jack was living in the little farming town of Solong, and I was hanging round. Black, the squatter, wanted some fencing done and a new stable built, or buggy and harness-house, at his place at Haviland, a few miles out of Solong. Jack and I were good Bush carpenters, so we took the job to keep us going till something else turned up. 'Better than doing nothing,' said Jack.

'There's a nice little girl in service at Black's,' he said. 'She's more like an adopted daughter, in fact, than a servant. She's a real good little girl, and good-looking into the bargain. I hear that young Black is sweet on her, but they say she won't have anything to do with him. I know a lot of chaps that have tried for her, but they've never had

any luck. She's a regular little dumpling, and I like dumplings. They call her 'Possum. You ought to try a bear up in that direction, Joe.'

I was always shy with women—except perhaps some that I should have fought shy of; but Jack wasn't—he was afraid of no woman, good, bad, or indifferent. I haven't time to explain why, but somehow, whenever a girl took any notice of me I took it for granted that she was only playing with me, and felt nasty about it. I made one or two mistakes, but—ah well!

'My wife knows little 'Possum,' said Jack. 'I'll get her to ask her out to our place and let you know.'

I reckoned that he wouldn't get me there then, and made a note to be on the watch for tricks. I had a hopeless little love-story behind me, of course. I suppose most married men can look back to their lost love; few marry the first flame. Many a married man looks back and thinks it was damned lucky that he didn't get the girl he couldn't have. Jack had been my successful rival, only he didn't know it—I don't think his wife knew it either. I used to think her the prettiest and sweetest little girl in the district.

But Jack was mighty keen on fixing me up with the little girl at Haviland. He seemed to take it for granted that I was going to fall in love with her at first sight. He took too many things for granted as far as I was concerned, and got me into awful tangles sometimes.

'You let me alone, and I'll fix you up, Joe,' he said, as we rode up to the station. 'I'll make it all right with the girl. You're rather a good-looking chap. You've got the sort of eyes that take with girls, only you don't know it; you haven't

got the go. If I had your eyes along with my other attractions, I'd be in trouble on account of a woman about once a-week.'

'For God's sake shut up, Jack,' I said.

Do you remember the first glimpse you got of your wife? Perhaps not in England, where so many couples grow up together from childhood; but it's different in Australia, where you may hail from two thousand miles away from where your wife was born, and yet she may be a countrywoman of yours, and a countrywoman in ideas and politics too. I remember the first glimpse I got of Mary.

It was a two-storey brick house with wide balconies and verandahs all round, and a double row of pines down to the front gate. Parallel at the back was an old slab-and-shingle place, one room deep and about eight rooms long, with a row of skillions at the back: the place was used for kitchen, laundry, servants' rooms, &c. This was the old homestead before the new house was built. There was a wide, old-fashioned, brick-floored verandah in front, with an open end; there was ivy climbing up the verandah post on one side and a baby-rose on the other, and a grape-vine near the chimney. We rode up to the end of the verandah, and Jack called to see if there was any one at home, and Mary came trotting out; so it was in the frame of vines that I first saw her.

More than once since then I've had a fancy to wonder whether the rose-bush killed the grape-vine or the ivy smothered 'em both in the end. I used to have a vague idea of riding that way some day to see. You do get strange fancies at odd times.

Jack asked her if the boss was in. He did all the talking. I saw a little girl, rather plump, with a complexion like a New England or Blue Mountain girl, or a girl from Tasmania or from Gippsland in Victoria. Red and white girls were very scarce in the Solong district. She had the biggest and brightest eyes I'd seen round there, dark hazel eyes, as I found out afterwards, and bright as a 'possum's. No wonder they called her "Possum". I forgot at once that Mrs Jack Barnes was the prettiest girl in the district. I felt a sort of comfortable satisfaction in the fact that I was on horseback: most Bushmen look better on horseback. It was a black filly, a fresh young thing, and she seemed as shy of girls as I was myself. I noticed Mary glanced in my direction once or twice to see if she knew me; but, when she looked, the filly took all my attention. Mary trotted in to tell old Black he was wanted, and after Jack had seen him, and arranged to start work next day, we started back to Solong.

I expected Jack to ask me what I thought of Mary—but he didn't. He squinted at me sideways once or twice and didn't say anything for a long time, and then he started talking of other things. I began to feel wild at him. He seemed so damnably satisfied with the way things were going. He seemed to reckon that I was a gone case now; but, as he didn't say so, I had no way of getting at him. I felt sure he'd go home and tell his wife that Joe Wilson was properly gone on little 'Possum at Haviland. That was all Jack's way.

Next morning we started to work. We were to build the buggy-house at the back near the end of the old house, but first we had to take down a rotten old place that might have been the original hut in the Bush before the old house was

built. There was a window in it, opposite the laundry window in the old place, and the first thing I did was to take out the sash. I'd noticed Jack yarning with 'Possum before he started work. While I was at work at the window he called me round to the other end of the hut to help him lift a grindstone out of the way; and when we'd done it, he took the tips of my ear between his fingers and thumb and stretched it and whispered into it—

'Don't hurry with that window, Joe; the strips are hardwood and hard to get off—you'll have to take the sash out very carefully so as not to break the glass.' Then he stretched my ear a little more and put his mouth closer—

'Make a looking-glass of that window, Joe,' he said.

I was used to Jack, and when I went back to the window I started to puzzle out what he meant, and presently I saw it by chance.

That window reflected the laundry window: the room was dark inside and there was a good clear reflection; and presently I saw Mary come to the laundry window and stand with her hands behind her back, thoughtfully watching me. The laundry window had an old-fashioned hinged sash, and I like that sort of window—there's more romance about it, I think. There was thick dark-green ivy all round the window, and Mary looked prettier than a picture. I squared up my shoulders and put my heels together and put as much style as I could into the work. I couldn't have turned round to save my life.

Presently Jack came round, and Mary disappeared.

'Well?' he whispered.

'You're a fool, Jack,' I said. 'She's only interested in the old house being pulled down.'

'That's all right,' he said. 'I've been keeping an eye on the business round the corner, and she ain't interested when I'm round this end.'

'You seem mighty interested in the business,' I said.

'Yes,' said Jack. 'This sort of thing just suits a man of my rank in times of peace.'

'What made you think of the window?' I asked.

'Oh, that's as simple as striking matches. I'm up to all those dodges. Why, where there wasn't a window, I've fixed up a piece of looking-glass to see if a girl was taking any notice of me when she thought I wasn't looking.'

He went away, and presently Mary was at the window again, and this time she had a tray with cups of tea and a plate of cake and bread-and-butter. I was prizing off the strips that held the sash, very carefully, and my heart suddenly commenced to gallop, without any reference to me. I'd never felt like that before, except once or twice. It was just as if I'd swallowed some clockwork arrangement, unconsciously, and it had started to go, without warning. I reckon it was all on account of that blarsted Jack working me up. He had a quiet way of working you up to a thing, that made you want to hit him sometimes—after you'd made an ass of yourself.

I didn't hear Mary at first. I hoped Jack would come round and help me out of the fix, but he didn't.

'Mr—Mr Wilson!' said Mary. She had a sweet voice.

I turned round.

'I thought you and Mr Barnes might like a cup of tea.'

‘Oh, thank you!’ I said, and I made a dive for the window, as if hurry would help it. I trod on an old cask-hoop; it sprang up and dented my shin and I stumbled—and that didn’t help matters much.

‘Oh! did you hurt yourself, Mr Wilson?’ cried Mary.

‘Hurt myself! Oh no, not at all, thank you,’ I blurted out. ‘It takes more than that to hurt me.’

I was about the reddest shy lanky fool of a Bushman that was ever taken at a disadvantage on foot, and when I took the tray my hands shook so that a lot of the tea was spilt into the saucers. I embarrassed her too, like the damned fool I was, till she must have been as red as I was, and it’s a wonder we didn’t spill the whole lot between us. I got away from the window in as much of a hurry as if Jack had cut his leg with a chisel and fainted, and I was running with whisky for him. I blundered round to where he was, feeling like a man feels when he’s just made an ass of himself in public. The memory of that sort of thing hurts you worse and makes you jerk your head more impatiently than the thought of a past crime would, I think.

I pulled myself together when I got to where Jack was.

‘Here, Jack!’ I said. ‘I’ve struck something all right; here’s some tea and brownie—we’ll hang out here all right.’

Jack took a cup of tea and a piece of cake and sat down to enjoy it, just as if he’d paid for it and ordered it to be sent out about that time.

He was silent for a while, with the sort of silence that always made me wild at him. Presently he said, as if he’d just thought of it—

‘That’s a very pretty little girl, ‘Possum, isn’t she, Joe? Do you notice how she dresses?—always fresh and trim. But she’s got on her best bib-and-tucker to-day, and a pinafore with frills to it. And it’s ironing-day, too. It can’t be on your account. If it was Saturday or Sunday afternoon, or some holiday, I could understand it. But perhaps one of her admirers is going to take her to the church bazaar in Solong to-night. That’s what it is.’

He gave me time to think over that.

‘But yet she seems interested in you, Joe,’ he said. ‘Why didn’t you offer to take her to the bazaar instead of letting another chap get in ahead of you? You miss all your chances, Joe.’

Then a thought struck me. I ought to have known Jack well enough to have thought of it before.

‘Look here, Jack,’ I said. ‘What have you been saying to that girl about me?’

‘Oh, not much,’ said Jack. ‘There isn’t much to say about you.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘Oh, nothing in particular. She’d heard all about you before.’

‘She hadn’t heard much good, I suppose,’ I said.

‘Well, that’s true, as far as I could make out. But you’ve only got yourself to blame. I didn’t have the breeding and rearing of you. I smoothed over matters with her as much as I could.’

‘What did you tell her?’ I said. ‘That’s what I want to know.’

‘Well, to tell the truth, I didn’t tell her anything much. I only answered questions.’

‘And what questions did she ask?’

‘Well, in the first place, she asked if your name wasn’t Joe Wilson; and I said it was, as far as I knew. Then she said she heard that you wrote poetry, and I had to admit that that was true.’

‘Look here, Jack,’ I said, ‘I’ve two minds to punch your head.’

‘And she asked me if it was true that you were wild,’ said Jack, ‘and I said you was, a bit. She said it seemed a pity. She asked me if it was true that you drank, and I drew a long face and said that I was sorry to say it was true. She asked me if you had any friends, and I said none that I knew of, except me. I said that you’d lost all your friends; they stuck to you as long as they could, but they had to give you best, one after the other.’

‘What next?’

‘She asked me if you were delicate, and I said no, you were as tough as fencing-wire. She said you looked rather pale and thin, and asked me if you’d had an illness lately. And I said no— it was all on account of the wild, dissipated life you’d led. She said it was a pity you hadn’t a mother or a sister to look after you— it was a pity that something couldn’t be done for you, and I said it was, but I was afraid that nothing could be done. I told her that I was doing all I could to keep you straight.’

I knew enough of Jack to know that most of this was true. And so she only pitied me after all. I felt as if I’d been

courting her for six months and she'd thrown me over—but I didn't know anything about women yet.

'Did you tell her I was in jail?' I growled.

'No, by Gum! I forgot that. But never mind I'll fix that up all right. I'll tell her that you got two years' hard for horse-stealing. That ought to make her interested in you, if she isn't already.'

We smoked a while.

'And was that all she said?' I asked.

'Who?—Oh! 'Possum,' said Jack rousing himself. 'Well—no; let me think—— We got chatting of other things—you know a married man's privileged, and can say a lot more to a girl than a single man can. I got talking nonsense about sweethearts, and one thing led to another till at last she said, "I suppose Mr Wilson's got a sweetheart, Mr Barnes?"'

'And what did you say?' I growled.

'Oh, I told her that you were a holy terror amongst the girls,' said Jack. 'You'd better take back that tray, Joe, and let us get to work.'

I wouldn't take back the tray—but that didn't mend matters, for Jack took it back himself.

I didn't see Mary's reflection in the window again, so I took the window out. I reckoned that she was just a big-hearted, impulsive little thing, as many Australian girls are, and I reckoned that I was a fool for thinking for a moment that she might give me a second thought, except by way of kindness. Why! young Black and half a dozen better men than me were sweet on her, and young Black was to get his father's station and the money—or rather his mother's money, for she held the stuff (she kept it close too, by all

accounts). Young Black was away at the time, and his mother was dead against him about Mary, but that didn't make any difference, as far as I could see. I reckoned that it was only just going to be a hopeless, heart-breaking, stand-far-off-and-worship affair, as far as I was concerned— like my first love affair, that I haven't told you about yet. I was tired of being pitied by good girls. You see, I didn't know women then. If I had known, I think I might have made more than one mess of my life.

Jack rode home to Solong every night. I was staying at a pub some distance out of town, between Solong and Haviland. There were three or four wet days, and we didn't get on with the work. I fought shy of Mary till one day she was hanging out clothes and the line broke. It was the old-style sixpenny clothes-line. The clothes were all down, but it was clean grass, so it didn't matter much. I looked at Jack.

'Go and help her, you capital Idiot!' he said, and I made the plunge.

'Oh, thank you, Mr Wilson!' said Mary, when I came to help. She had the broken end of the line and was trying to hold some of the clothes off the ground, as if she could pull it an inch with the heavy wet sheets and table-cloths and things on it, or as if it would do any good if she did. But that's the way with women —especially little women—some of 'em would try to pull a store bullock if they got the end of the rope on the right side of the fence. I took the line from Mary, and accidentally touched her soft, plump little hand as I did so: it sent a thrill right through me. She seemed a lot cooler than I was.

Now, in cases like this, especially if you lose your head a bit, you get hold of the loose end of the rope that's hanging from the post with one hand, and the end of the line with the clothes on with the other, and try to pull 'em far enough together to make a knot. And that's about all you do for the present, except look like a fool. Then I took off the post end, spliced the line, took it over the fork, and pulled, while Mary helped me with the prop. I thought Jack might have come and taken the prop from her, but he didn't; he just went on with his work as if nothing was happening inside the horizon.

She'd got the line about two-thirds full of clothes, it was a bit short now, so she had to jump and catch it with one hand and hold it down while she pegged a sheet she'd thrown over. I'd made the plunge now, so I volunteered to help her. I held down the line while she threw the things over and pegged out. As we got near the post and higher I straightened out some ends and pegged myself. Bushmen are handy at most things. We laughed, and now and again Mary would say, 'No, that's not the way, Mr Wilson; that's not right; the sheet isn't far enough over; wait till I fix it,' &c. I'd a reckless idea once of holding her up while she pegged, and I was glad afterwards that I hadn't made such a fool of myself.

'There's only a few more things in the basket, Miss Brand,' I said. 'You can't reach—I'll fix 'em up.'

She seemed to give a little gasp.

'Oh, those things are not ready yet,' she said, 'they're not rinsed,' and she grabbed the basket and held it away from me. The things looked the same to me as the rest on

the line; they looked rinsed enough and blued too. I reckoned that she didn't want me to take the trouble, or thought that I mightn't like to be seen hanging out clothes, and was only doing it out of kindness.

'Oh, it's no trouble,' I said, 'let me hang 'em out. I like it. I've hung out clothes at home on a windy day,' and I made a reach into the basket. But she flushed red, with temper I thought, and snatched the basket away.

'Excuse me, Mr Wilson,' she said, 'but those things are not ready yet!' and she marched into the wash-house.

'Ah well! you've got a little temper of your own,' I thought to myself.

When I told Jack, he said that I'd made another fool of myself. He said I'd both disappointed and offended her. He said that my line was to stand off a bit and be serious and melancholy in the background.

That evening when we'd started home, we stopped some time yarning with a chap we met at the gate; and I happened to look back, and saw Mary hanging out the rest of the things—she thought that we were out of sight. Then I understood why those things weren't ready while we were round.

For the next day or two Mary didn't take the slightest notice of me, and I kept out of her way. Jack said I'd disillusioned her— and hurt her dignity—which was a thousand times worse. He said I'd spoilt the thing altogether. He said that she'd got an idea that I was shy and poetic, and I'd only shown myself the usual sort of Bush-whacker.

I noticed her talking and chatting with other fellows once or twice, and it made me miserable. I got drunk two evenings running, and then, as it appeared afterwards, Mary consulted Jack, and at last she said to him, when we were together—

‘Do you play draughts, Mr Barnes?’

‘No,’ said Jack.

‘Do you, Mr Wilson?’ she asked, suddenly turning her big, bright eyes on me, and speaking to me for the first time since last washing-day.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I do a little.’ Then there was a silence, and I had to say something else.

‘Do you play draughts, Miss Brand?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘but I can’t get any one to play with me here of an evening, the men are generally playing cards or reading.’ Then she said, ‘It’s very dull these long winter evenings when you’ve got nothing to do. Young Mr Black used to play draughts, but he’s away.’

I saw Jack winking at me urgently.

‘I’ll play a game with you, if you like,’ I said, ‘but I ain’t much of a player.’

‘Oh, thank you, Mr Wilson! When shall you have an evening to spare?’

We fixed it for that same evening. We got chummy over the draughts. I had a suspicion even then that it was a put-up job to keep me away from the pub.

Perhaps she found a way of giving a hint to old Black without committing herself. Women have ways—or perhaps Jack did it. Anyway, next day the Boss came round and said to me—

'Look here, Joe, you've got no occasion to stay at the pub. Bring along your blankets and camp in one of the spare rooms of the old house. You can have your tucker here.'

He was a good sort, was Black the squatter: a squatter of the old school, who'd shared the early hardships with his men, and couldn't see why he should not shake hands and have a smoke and a yarn over old times with any of his old station hands that happened to come along. But he'd married an Englishwoman after the hardships were over, and she'd never got any Australian notions.

Next day I found one of the skillion rooms scrubbed out and a bed fixed up for me. I'm not sure to this day who did it, but I supposed that good-natured old Black had given one of the women a hint. After tea I had a yarn with Mary, sitting on a log of the wood-heap. I don't remember exactly how we both came to be there, or who sat down first. There was about two feet between us. We got very chummy and confidential. She told me about her childhood and her father.

He'd been an old mate of Black's, a younger son of a well-to-do English family (with blue blood in it, I believe), and sent out to Australia with a thousand pounds to make his way, as many younger sons are, with more or less. They think they're hard done by; they blue their thousand pounds in Melbourne or Sydney, and they don't make any more nowadays, for the Roarin' Days have been dead these thirty years. I wish I'd had a thousand pounds to start on!

Mary's mother was the daughter of a German immigrant, who selected up there in the old days. She had a will of her own as far as I could understand, and bossed the home till

the day of her death. Mary's father made money, and lost it, and drank—and died. Mary remembered him sitting on the verandah one evening with his hand on her head, and singing a German song (the 'Lorelei', I think it was) softly, as if to himself. Next day he stayed in bed, and the children were kept out of the room; and, when he died, the children were adopted round (there was a little money coming from England).

Mary told me all about her girlhood. She went first to live with a sort of cousin in town, in a house where they took in cards on a tray, and then she came to live with Mrs Black, who took a fancy to her at first. I'd had no boyhood to speak of, so I gave her some of my ideas of what the world ought to be, and she seemed interested.

Next day there were sheets on my bed, and I felt pretty cocky until I remembered that I'd told her I had no one to care for me; then I suspected pity again.

But next evening we remembered that both our fathers and mothers were dead, and discovered that we had no friends except Jack and old Black, and things went on very satisfactorily.

And next day there was a little table in my room with a crocheted cover and a looking-glass.

I noticed the other girls began to act mysterious and giggle when I was round, but Mary didn't seem aware of it.

We got very chummy. Mary wasn't comfortable at Haviland. Old Black was very fond of her and always took her part, but she wanted to be independent. She had a great idea of going to Sydney and getting into the hospital as a nurse. She had friends in Sydney, but she had no

money. There was a little money coming to her when she was twenty-one—a few pounds—and she was going to try and get it before that time.

‘Look here, Miss Brand,’ I said, after we’d watched the moon rise. ‘I’ll lend you the money. I’ve got plenty—more than I know what to do with.’

But I saw I’d hurt her. She sat up very straight for a while, looking before her; then she said it was time to go in, and said ‘Good-night, Mr Wilson.’

I reckoned I’d done it that time; but Mary told me afterwards that she was only hurt because it struck her that what she said about money might have been taken for a hint. She didn’t understand me yet, and I didn’t know human nature. I didn’t say anything to Jack— in fact about this time I left off telling him about things. He didn’t seem hurt; he worked hard and seemed happy.

I really meant what I said to Mary about the money. It was pure good nature. I’d be a happier man now, I think, and richer man perhaps, if I’d never grown any more selfish than I was that night on the wood-heap with Mary. I felt a great sympathy for her— but I got to love her. I went through all the ups and downs of it. One day I was having tea in the kitchen, and Mary and another girl, named Sarah, reached me a clean plate at the same time: I took Sarah’s plate because she was first, and Mary seemed very nasty about it, and that gave me great hopes. But all next evening she played draughts with a drover that she’d chummed up with. I pretended to be interested in Sarah’s talk, but it didn’t seem to work.

A few days later a Sydney Jackaroo visited the station. He had a good pea-rifle, and one afternoon he started to teach Mary to shoot at a target. They seemed to get very chummy. I had a nice time for three or four days, I can tell you. I was worse than a wall-eyed bullock with the pleuro. The other chaps had a shot out of the rifle. Mary called 'Mr Wilson' to have a shot, and I made a worse fool of myself by sulking. If it hadn't been a blooming Jackaroo I wouldn't have minded so much.

Next evening the Jackaroo and one or two other chaps and the girls went out 'possum-shooting. Mary went. I could have gone, but I didn't. I mooched round all the evening like an orphan bandicoot on a burnt ridge, and then I went up to the pub and filled myself with beer, and damned the world, and came home and went to bed. I think that evening was the only time I ever wrote poetry down on a piece of paper. I got so miserable that I enjoyed it.

I felt better next morning, and reckoned I was cured. I ran against Mary accidentally and had to say something.

'How did you enjoy yourself yesterday evening, Miss Brand?' I asked.

'Oh, very well, thank you, Mr Wilson,' she said. Then she asked, 'How did you enjoy yourself, Mr Wilson?'

I puzzled over that afterwards, but couldn't make anything out of it. Perhaps she only said it for the sake of saying something. But about this time my handkerchiefs and collars disappeared from the room and turned up washed and ironed and laid tidily on my table. I used to keep an eye out, but could never catch anybody near my room. I straightened up, and kept my room a bit tidy, and

when my handkerchief got too dirty, and I was ashamed of letting it go to the wash, I'd slip down to the river after dark and wash it out, and dry it next day, and rub it up to look as if it hadn't been washed, and leave it on my table. I felt so full of hope and joy that I worked twice as hard as Jack, till one morning he remarked casually—

'I see you've made a new mash, Joe. I saw the half-caste cook tidying up your room this morning and taking your collars and things to the wash-house.'

I felt very much off colour all the rest of the day, and I had such a bad night of it that I made up my mind next morning to look the hopelessness square in the face and live the thing down.

It was the evening before Anniversary Day. Jack and I had put in a good day's work to get the job finished, and Jack was having a smoke and a yarn with the chaps before he started home. We sat on an old log along by the fence at the back of the house. There was Jimmy Nowlett the bullock-driver, and long Dave Regan the drover, and big Jim Bullock the fencer, and one or two others. Mary and the station girls and one or two visitors were sitting under the old verandah. The Jackaroo was there too, so I felt happy. It was the girls who used to bring the chaps hanging round. They were getting up a dance party for Anniversary night. Along in the evening another chap came riding up to the station: he was a big shearer, a dark, handsome fellow, who looked like a gipsy: it was reckoned that there was foreign blood in him. He went by the name of Romany. He was supposed to be shook after Mary too. He had the nastiest temper and the best violin in the district, and the chaps put up with him a

lot because they wanted him to play at Bush dances. The moon had risen over Pine Ridge, but it was dusky where we were. We saw Romany loom up, riding in from the gate; he rode round the end of the coach-house and across towards where we were—I suppose he was going to tie up his horse at the fence; but about half-way across the grass he disappeared. It struck me that there was something peculiar about the way he got down, and I heard a sound like a horse stumbling.

‘What the hell’s Romany trying to do?’ said Jimmy Nowlett. ‘He couldn’t have fell off his horse—or else he’s drunk.’

A couple of chaps got up and went to see. Then there was that waiting, mysterious silence that comes when something happens in the dark and nobody knows what it is. I went over, and the thing dawned on me. I’d stretched a wire clothes-line across there during the day, and had forgotten all about it for the moment. Romany had no idea of the line, and, as he rode up, it caught him on a level with his elbows and scraped him off his horse. He was sitting on the grass, swearing in a surprised voice, and the horse looked surprised too. Romany wasn’t hurt, but the sudden shock had spoilt his temper. He wanted to know who’d put up that bloody line. He came over and sat on the log. The chaps smoked a while.

‘What did you git down so sudden for, Romany?’ asked Jim Bullock presently. ‘Did you hurt yerself on the pommel?’

‘Why didn’t you ask the horse to go round?’ asked Dave Regan.

'I'd only like to know who put up that bleeding wire!' growled Romany.

'Well,' said Jimmy Nowlett, 'if we'd put up a sign to beware of the line you couldn't have seen it in the dark.'

'Unless it was a transparency with a candle behind it,' said Dave Regan. 'But why didn't you get down on one end, Romany, instead of all along? It wouldn't have jolted yer so much.'

All this with the Bush drawl, and between the puffs of their pipes. But I didn't take any interest in it. I was brooding over Mary and the Jackaroo.

'I've heard of men getting down over their horse's head,' said Dave presently, in a reflective sort of way—'in fact I've done it myself— but I never saw a man get off backwards over his horse's rump.'

But they saw that Romany was getting nasty, and they wanted him to play the fiddle next night, so they dropped it.

Mary was singing an old song. I always thought she had a sweet voice, and I'd have enjoyed it if that damned Jackaroo hadn't been listening too. We listened in silence until she'd finished.

'That gal's got a nice voice,' said Jimmy Nowlett.

'Nice voice!' snarled Romany, who'd been waiting for a chance to be nasty. 'Why, I've heard a tom-cat sing better.'

I moved, and Jack, he was sitting next me, nudged me to keep quiet. The chaps didn't like Romany's talk about 'Possum at all. They were all fond of her: she wasn't a pet or a tomboy, for she wasn't built that way, but they were fond of her in such a way that they didn't like to hear anything said about her. They said nothing for a while, but it meant a

lot. Perhaps the single men didn't care to speak for fear that it would be said that they were gone on Mary. But presently Jimmy Nowlett gave a big puff at his pipe and spoke—

'I suppose you got bit too in that quarter, Romany?'

'Oh, she tried it on, but it didn't go,' said Romany. 'I've met her sort before. She's setting her cap at that Jackaroo now. Some girls will run after anything with trousers on,' and he stood up.

Jack Barnes must have felt what was coming, for he grabbed my arm, and whispered, 'Sit still, Joe, damn you! He's too good for you!' but I was on my feet and facing Romany as if a giant hand had reached down and wrenched me off the log and set me there.

'You're a damned crawler, Romany!' I said.

Little Jimmy Nowlett was between us and the other fellows round us before a blow got home. 'Hold on, you damned fools!' they said. 'Keep quiet till we get away from the house!' There was a little clear flat down by the river and plenty of light there, so we decided to go down there and have it out.

Now I never was a fighting man; I'd never learnt to use my hands. I scarcely knew how to put them up. Jack often wanted to teach me, but I wouldn't bother about it. He'd say, 'You'll get into a fight some day, Joe, or out of one, and shame me;' but I hadn't the patience to learn. He'd wanted me to take lessons at the station after work, but he used to get excited, and I didn't want Mary to see him knocking me about. Before he was married Jack was always getting into fights—he generally tackled a better man and got a hiding; but he didn't seem to care so long as he made a good show