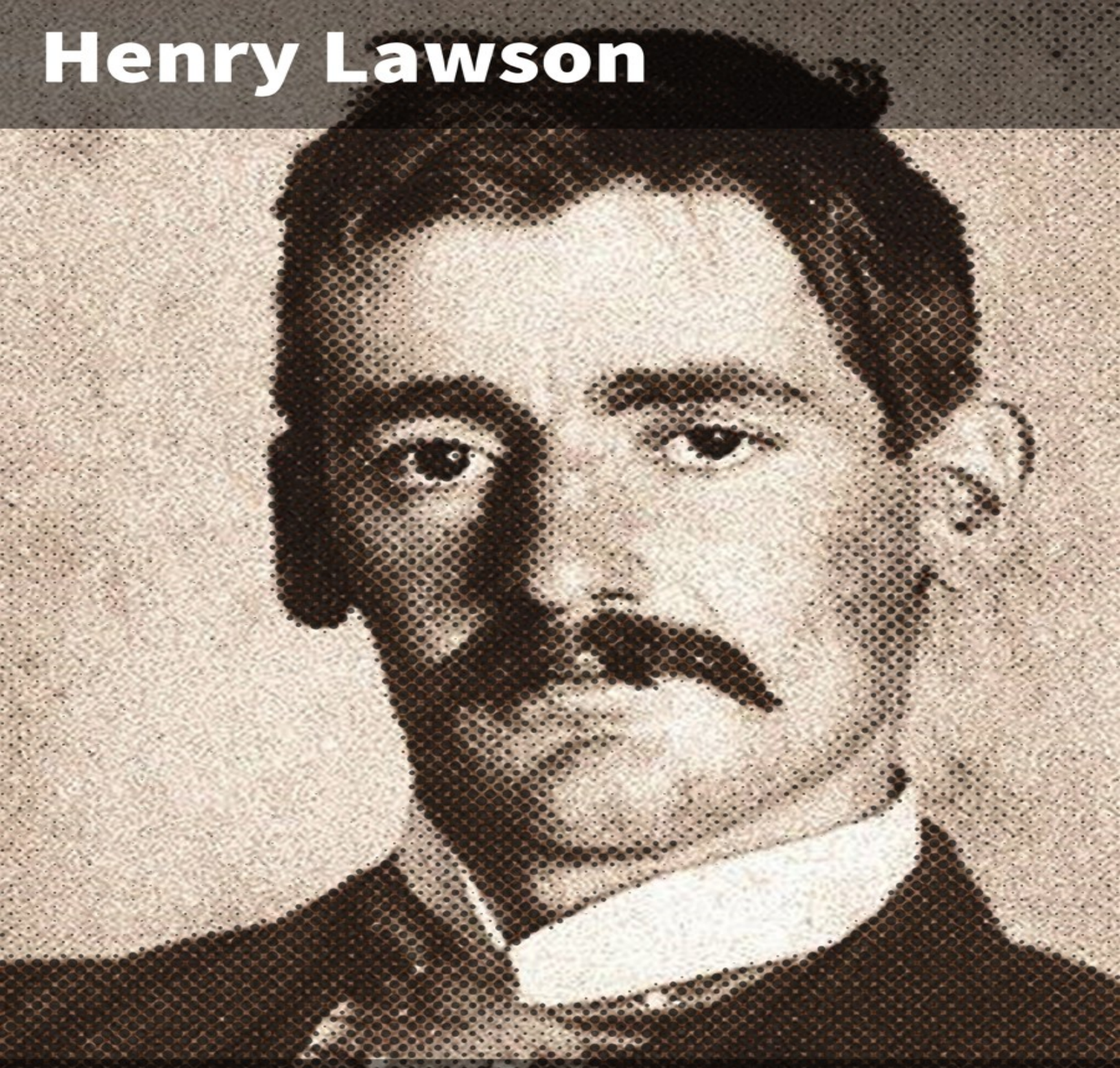
Henry Lawson



The Prose Works of Henry Lawson Volume I

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338090614

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An Old Mate Of Your Father’s

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You remember when we hurried home from the old bush school how we were sometimes startled by a bearded apparition, who smiled kindly down on us, and whom our mother introduced, as we raked off our hats, as “An old mate of your father’s on the diggings, Johnny.” And he would pat our heads and say we were fine boys, or girls—as the case may have been—and that we had our father’s nose but our mother’s eyes, or the other way about; and say that the baby was the dead spit of its mother, and then added, for father’s benefit: “But yet he’s like you, Tom.” It did seem strange to the children to hear him address the old man by his Christian name—considering that the mother always referred to him as “Father.” She called the old mate Mr So-and-so, and father called him Bill, or something to that effect.

Occasionally the old mate would come dressed in the latest city fashion, and at other times in a new suit of reach-me-downs, and yet again he would turn up in clean white moleskins, washed tweed coat, Crimean shirt, blucher boots, soft felt hat, with a fresh-looking speckled handkerchief round his neck. But his face was mostly round and brown and jolly, his hands were always horny, and his beard grey. Sometimes he might have seemed strange and uncouth to us at first, but the old man never appeared the least surprised at anything he said or did—they understood each other so well—and we would soon take to this relic of our father’s past, who would have fruit or lollies for us—

strange that he always remembered them—and would surreptitiously slip “shilluns” into our dirty little hands, and tell us stories about the old days, “when me an’ yer father was on the diggin’s, an’ you wasn’t thought of, my boy.”

Sometimes the old mate would stay over Sunday, and in the forenoon or after dinner he and father would take a walk amongst the deserted shafts of Sapling Gully or along Quartz Ridge, and criticize old ground, and talk of past diggers’ mistakes, and second bottoms, and feelers, and dips, and leads—also outcrops—and absently pick up pieces of quartz and slate, rub them on their sleeves, look at them in an abstracted manner, and drop them again; and they would talk of some old lead they had worked on: “Hogan’s party was here on one side of us, Macintosh was here on the other, Mac was getting good gold and so was Hogan, and now, why the blanky blank weren’t we on gold?” And the mate would always agree that there was “gold in them ridges and gullies yet, if a man only had the money behind him to git at it.” And then perhaps the guv’nor would show him a spot where he intended to put down a shaft some day—the old man was always thinking of putting down a shaft. And these two old fifty-niners would mooch round and sit on their heels on the sunny mullock heaps and break clay lumps between their hands, and lay plans for the putting down of shafts, and smoke, till an urchin was sent to “look for his father and Mr So-and-so, and tell ’em to come to their dinner.”

And again—mostly in the fresh of the morning—they would hang about the fences on the selection and review the live stock: five dusty skeletons of cows, a hollow-sided

calf or two, and one shocking piece of equine scenery—which, by the way, the old mate always praised. But the selector's heart was not in farming nor on selections—it was far away with the last new rush in Western Australia or Queensland, or perhaps buried in the worked-out ground of Tambaroora, Married Man's Creek, or Araluen; and by-and-by the memory of some half-forgotten reef or lead or Last Chance, Nil Desperandum, or Brown Snake claim would take their thoughts far back and away from the dusty patch of sods and struggling sprouts called the crop, or the few discouraged, half-dead slips which comprised the orchard. Then their conversation would be pointed with many Golden Points, Bakery Hill, Deep Creeks, Maitland Bars, Specimen Flats, and Chinamen's Gullies. And so they'd yarn till the youngster came to tell them that "Mother sez the breakfus is gettin' cold," and then the old mate would rouse himself and stretch and say, "Well, we mustn't keep the missus waitin', Tom!"

And, after tea, they would sit on a log of the wood-heap, or the edge of the veranda—that is, in warm weather—and yarn about Ballarat and Bendigo—of the days when we spoke of being on a place oftener than at it: *on* Ballarat, *on* Gulgong, *on* Lambing Flat, on *Creswick*—and they would use the definite article before the names, as: "on The Turon; The Lachlan; The Home Rule; The Canadian Lead." Then again they'd yarn of old mates, such as Tom Brook, Jack Henright, and poor Martin Ratcliffe—who was killed in his golden hole—and of other men whom they didn't seem to have known much about, and who went by the names of "Adelaide

Adolphus," "Corney George," and other names which might have been more or less applicable.

And sometimes they'd get talking, low and mysterious like, about "Th' Eureka Stockade;" and if we didn't understand and asked questions, "what was the Eureka Stockade?" or "what did they do it for?" father'd say: "Now, run away, sonny, and don't bother; me and Mr So-and-so want to talk." Father had the mark of a hole on his leg, which he said he got through a gun accident when a boy, and a scar on his side, that we saw when he was in swimming with us; he said he got that in an accident in a quartz-crushing machine. Mr So-and-so had a big scar on the side of his forehead that was caused by a pick accidentally slipping out of a loop in the rope, and falling down a shaft where he was working. But how was it they talked low, and their eyes brightened up, and they didn't look at each other, but away over sunset, and had to get up and walk about, and take a stroll in the cool of the evening when they talked about Eureka?

And, again they'd talk lower and more mysterious like, and perhaps mother would be passing the wood-heap and catch a word, and asked:

"Who was she, Tom?"

And Tom—father—would say:

"Oh, you didn't know her, Mary; she belonged to a family Bill knew at home."

And Bill would look solemn till mother had gone, and then they would smile a quiet smile, and stretch and say, "Ah, well!" and start something else.

They had yarns for the fireside, too, some of those old mates of our father’s, and one of them would often tell how a girl—a queen of the diggings—was married, and had her wedding-ring made out of the gold of that field; and how the diggers weighed their gold with the new wedding-ring—for luck—by hanging the ring on the hook of the scales and attaching their chamois-leather gold bags to it (whereupon she boasted that four hundred ounces of the precious metal passed through her wedding-ring); and how they lowered the young bride, blindfolded, down a golden hole in a big bucket, and got her to point out the drive from which the gold came that her ring was made out of. The point of this story seems to have been lost—or else we forget it—but it was characteristic. Had the girl been lowered down a duffer, and asked to point out the way to the gold, and had she done so successfully, there would have been some sense in it.

And they would talk of King, and Maggie Oliver, and G. V. Brooke, and others, and remember how the diggers went five miles out to meet the coach that brought the girl actress, and took the horses out and brought her in in triumph, and worshipped her, and sent her off in glory, and threw nuggets into her lap. And how she stood upon the box-seat and tore her sailor hat to pieces, and threw the fragments amongst the crowd; and how the diggers fought for the bits and thrust them inside their shirt bosoms; and how she broke down and cried, and could in her turn have worshipped those men—loved them, every one. They were boys all, and gentlemen all. There were college men, artists, poets, musicians, journalists—Bohemians all. Men from all

the lands and one. They understood art—and poverty was dead.

And perhaps the old mate would say slyly, but with a sad, quiet smile:

“Have you got that bit of straw yet, Tom?”

Those old mates had each three pasts behind them. The two they told each other when they became mates, and the one they had shared.

And when the visitor had gone by the coach we noticed that the old man would smoke a lot, and think as much, and take great interest in the fire, and be a trifle irritable perhaps.

Those old mates of our father’s are getting few and far between, and only happen along once in a way to keep the old man’s memory fresh, as it were. We met one to-day, and had a yarn with him, and afterwards we got thinking, and somehow began to wonder whether those ancient friends of ours were, or were not, better and kinder to their mates than we of the rising generation are to our fathers; and the doubt is painfully on the wrong side.

Settling On The Land

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The worst bore in Australia just now is the man who raves about getting the people on the land, and button-holes you in the street with a little scheme of his own. He generally does not know what he is talking about.

There is in Sydney a man named Tom Hopkins who settled on the land once, and sometimes you can get him to talk about it. He did very well at his trade in the city, years ago, until he began to think that he could do better up-country. Then he arranged with his sweetheart to be true to him and wait whilst he went west and made a home. She drops out of the story at this point.

He selected on a run at Dry Hole Creek, and for months awaited the arrival of the government surveyors to fix his boundaries; but they didn’t come, and, as he had no reason to believe they would turn up within the next ten years, he grubbed and fenced at a venture, and started farming operations.

Does the reader know what grubbing means? Tom does. He found the biggest, ugliest, and most useless trees on his particular piece of ground; also the greatest number of adamantine stumps. He started without experience, or with very little, but with plenty of advice from men who knew less about farming than he did. He found a soft place between two roots on one side of the first tree, made a narrow, irregular hole, and burrowed down till he reached a level where the tap-root was somewhat less than four feet in diameter, and not quite as hard as flint: then he found that

he hadn’t room to swing the axe, so he heaved out another ton or two of earth—and rested. Next day he sank a shaft on the other side of the gum; and after tea, over a pipe, it struck him that it would be a good idea to burn the tree out, and so use up the logs and lighter rubbish lying round. So he widened the excavation, rolled in some logs, and set fire to them—with no better result than to scorch the roots.

Tom persevered. He put the trace harness on his horse, drew in all the logs within half a mile, and piled them on the windward side of that gum; and during the night the fire found a soft place, and the tree burnt off about six feet above the surface, falling on a squatter’s boundary fence, and leaving the ugliest kind of stump to occupy the selector’s attention; which it did, for a week. He waited till the hole cooled, and then he went to work with pick, shovel, and axe: and even now he gets interested in drawings of machinery, such as are published in the agricultural weeklies, for getting out stumps without graft. He thought he would be able to get some posts and rails out of that tree, but found reason to think that a cast-iron column would split sooner—and straighter. He traced some of the surface roots to the other side of the selection, and broke most of his trace-chains trying to get them out by horse-power—for they had other roots going down from underneath. He cleared a patch in the course of time and for several seasons he broke more ploughshares than he could pay for.

Meanwhile the squatter was not idle. Tom’s tent was robbed several times, and his hut burnt down twice. Then he was charged with killing some sheep and a steer on the run,

and converting them to his own use, but got off mainly because there was a difference of opinion between the squatter and the other local J.P. concerning politics and religion.

Tom ploughed and sowed wheat, but nothing came up to speak of—the ground was too poor; so he carted stable manure six miles from the nearest town, manured the land, sowed another crop, and prayed for rain. It came. It raised a flood which washed the crop clean off the selection, together with several acres of manure, and a considerable portion of the original surface soil; and the water brought down enough sand to make a beach, and spread it over the field to a depth of six inches. The flood also took half a mile of fencing from along the creek-bank, and landed it in a bend, three miles down, on a dummy selection, where it was confiscated.

Tom didn't give up—he was energetic. He cleared another piece of ground on the siding, and sowed more wheat; it had the rust in it, or the smut—and averaged three shillings per bushel. Then he sowed lucerne and oats, and bought a few cows: he had an idea of starting a dairy. First, the cows' eyes got bad, and he sought the advice of a German cocky, and acted upon it; he blew powdered alum through paper tubes into the bad eyes, and got some of it snorted and butted back into his own. He cured the cows' eyes and got the sandy blight in his own, and for a week or so be couldn't tell one end of a cow from the other, but sat in a dark corner of the hut and groaned, and soaked his glued eyelashes in warm water. Germany stuck to him and nursed him, and saw him through.

Then the milkers got bad udders, and Tom took his life in his hands whenever he milked them. He got them all right presently—and butter fell to fourpence a pound. He and the aforesaid cocky made arrangements to send their butter to a better market; and then the cows contracted a disease which was known in those parts as “plooro permoanyer,” but generally referred to as “th’ ploorer.”

Again Tom sought advice, acting upon which he slit the cows’ ears, cut their tails half off to bleed them, and poured pints of “pain killer” into them through their nostrils; but they wouldn’t make an effort, except, perhaps, to rise and poke the selector when he tried to tempt their appetites with slices of immature pumpkin. They died peacefully and persistently, until all were gone save a certain dangerous, barren, slab-sided luny bovine with white eyes and much agility in jumping fences, who was known locally as Queen Elizabeth.

Tom shot Queen Elizabeth, and turned his attention to agriculture again. Then his plough horses took bad with some thing the Teuton called “der shtranguls.” He submitted them to a course of treatment in accordance with Jacob’s advice—and they died.

Even then Tom didn’t give in—there was grit in that man. He borrowed a broken-down dray-horse in return for its keep, coupled it with his own old riding hack, and started to finish ploughing. The team wasn’t a success. Whenever the draught horse’s knees gave way and he stumbled forward, he jerked the lighter horse back into the plough, and something would break. Then Tom would blaspheme till he was refreshed, mend up things with wire and bits of clothes-

line, fill his pockets with stones to throw at the team, and start again. Finally he hired a dummy's child to drive the horses. The brat did his best he tugged at the head of the team, prodded it behind, heaved rocks at it, cut a sapling, got up his enthusiasm, and wildly whacked the light horse whenever the other showed signs of moving—but he never succeeded in starting both horses at one and the same time. Moreover the youth was cheeky, and the selector's temper had been soured: he cursed the boy along with the horses, the plough, the selection, the squatter, and Australia. Yes, he cursed Australia. The boy cursed back, was chastised, and immediately went home and brought his father.

Then the dummy's dog tackled the selector's dog and this precipitated things. The dummy would have gone under had his wife not arrived on the scene with the eldest son and the rest of the family. They all fell foul of Tom. The woman was the worst. The selector's dog chawed the other and came to his master's rescue just in time—or Tom Hopkins would never have lived to become the inmate of a lunatic asylum.

Next year there happened to be good grass on Tom's selection and nowhere else, and he thought it wouldn't be a bad idea—to get a few poor sheep, and fatten them up for market: sheep were selling for about seven-and-sixpence a dozen at that time. Tom got a hundred or two, but the squatter had a man stationed at one side of the selection with dogs to set on the sheep directly they put their noses through the fence (Tom's was not a sheep fence). The dogs chased the sheep across the selection and into the run

again on the other side, where another man waited ready to pound them.

Tom’s dog did his best; but he fell sick while chawing up the fourth capitalistic canine, and subsequently died. The dummies had robbed that cur with poison before starting it across—that was the only way they could get at Tom’s dog.

Tom thought that two might play at the game, and he tried; but his nephew, who happened to be up from the city on a visit, was arrested at the instigation of the squatter for alleged sheep-stealing, and sentenced to two years’ hard; during which time the selector himself got six months for assaulting the squatter with intent to do him grievous bodily harm-which, indeed, he more than attempted, if a broken nose, a fractured jaw, and the loss of most of the squatters’ teeth amounted to anything. The squatter by this time had made peace with the other local Justice, and had become his father-in-law.

When Tom came out there was little left for him to live for; but he took a job of fencing, got a few pounds together, and prepared to settle on the land some more. He got a “missus” and a few cows during the next year; the missus robbed him and ran away with the dummy, and the cows died in the drought, or were impounded by the squatter while on their way to water. Then Tom rented an orchard up the creek, and a hailstorm destroyed all the fruit. Germany happened to be represented at the time, Jacob having sought shelter at Tom’s hut on his way home from town. Tom stood leaning against the door post with the hail beating on him through it all. His eyes were very bright and very dry, and every breath was a choking sob. Jacob let him

stand there, and sat inside with a dreamy expression on his hard face, thinking of childhood and fatherland, perhaps. When it was over he led Tom to a stool and said, “You waits there, Tom. I must go home for somedings. You sits there still and waits twenty minutes;” then he got on his horse and rode off muttering to himself; “Dot man moost gry, dot man moost gry.” He was back inside of twenty minutes with a bottle of wine and a cornet under his overcoat. He poured the wine into two pint-pots, made Tom drink, drank himself, and then took his cornet, stood up at the door, and played a German march into the rain after the retreating storm. The hail had passed over his vineyard and he was a ruined man too. Tom did “gry” and was all right. He was a bit disheartened, but he did another job of fencing, and was just beginning to think about “puttin’ in a few vines an’ fruit-trees” when the government surveyors—whom he’d forgotten all about—had a resurrection and came and surveyed, and found that the real selection was located amongst some barren ridges across the creek. Tom reckoned it was lucky he didn’t plant the orchard, and he set about shifting his home and fences to the new site. But the squatter interfered at this point, entered into possession of the farm and all on it, and took action against the selector for trespass—laying the damages at £2500.

Tom was admitted to the lunatic asylum at Parramatta next year, and the squatter was sent there the following summer, having been ruined by the drought, the rabbits, the banks, and a wool-ring. The two became very friendly, and had many a sociable argument about the feasibility—or

otherwise—of blowing open the flood-gates of Heaven in a dry season with dynamite.

Tom was discharged a few years since. He knocks about certain suburbs a good deal. He is seen in daylight seldom, and at night mostly in connection with a dray and a lantern. He says his one great regret is that he wasn’t found to be of unsound mind before he went up-country.

Enter Mitchell

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The Western train had just arrived at Redfern railway station with a lot of ordinary passengers and one swagman.

He was short, and stout, and bow-legged, and freckled, and sandy. He had red hair and small, twinkling, grey eyes, and—what often goes with such things—the expression of a born comedian. He was dressed in a ragged, well-washed print shirt, an old black waistcoat with a calico back, a pair of cloudy moleskins patched at the knees and held up by a plaited greenhide belt buckled loosely round his hips, a pair of well-worn, fuzzy blucher boots, and a soft felt hat, green with age, and with no brim worth mentioning, and no crown to speak of. He swung a swag on to the platform, shouldered it, pulled out a billy and water-bag, and then went to a dog-box in the brake van.

Five minutes later he appeared on the edge of the cab platform, with an anxious-looking cattle-dog crouching against his legs, and one end of the chain in his hand. He eased down the swag against a post, turned his face to the city, tilted his hat forward, and scratched the well-developed back of his head with a little finger. He seemed undecided what track to take.

“Cab, Sir!”

The swagman turned slowly and regarded cabby with a quiet grin.

“Now, do I look as if I want a cab?”

“Well, why not? No harm, anyway—I thought you might want a cab.”

Swaggy scratched his head, reflectively.

“Well,” he said, “you’re the first man that has thought so these ten years. What do I want with a cab?”

“To go where you’re going, of course.”

“Do I look knocked up?”

“I didn’t say you did.”

“And I didn’t say you said I did.... Now, I’ve been on the track this five years. I’ve tramped two thousan’ miles since last Chris’mas, and I don’t see why I can’t tramp the last mile. Do you think my old dog wants a cab?”

The dog shivered and whimpered; he seemed to want to get away from the crowd.

“But then, you see, you ain’t going to carry that swag through the streets, are you?” asked the cabman.

“Why not? Who’ll stop me! There ain’t no law agin it, I b’lieve?”

“But then, you see, it don’t look well, you know.”

“Ah! I thought we’d get to it at last.”

The traveller up-ended his bluey against his knee, gave it an affectionate pat, and then straightened himself up and looked fixedly at the cabman.

“Now, look here!” he said, sternly and impressively, “can you see anything wrong with that old swag o’ mine?”

It was a stout, dumpy swag, with a red blanket outside, patched with blue, and the edge of a blue blanket showing in the inner rings at the end. The swag might have been newer; it might have been cleaner; it might have been hooped with decent straps, instead of bits of clothes-line and greenhide—but otherwise there was nothing the matter with it, as swags go.

“I’ve humped that old swag for years,” continued the bushman; “I’ve carried that old swag thousands of miles—as that old dog knows—an’ no one ever bothered about the look of it, or of me, or of my old dog, neither; and do you think I’m going to be ashamed of that old swag, for a cabby or anyone else? Do you think I’m going to study anybody’s feelings? No one ever studied mine! I’m in two minds to summon you for using insulting language towards me!”

He lifted the swag by the twisted towel which served for a shoulder-strap, swung it into the cab, got in himself and hauled the dog after him.

“You can drive me somewhere where I can leave my swag and dog while I get some decent clothes to see a tailor in,” he said to the cabman. “My old dog ain’t used to cabs, you see.”

Then he added, reflectively: “I drove a cab myself, once, for five years in Sydney.”

Stiffner And Jim (Thirdly, Bill)

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We were tramping down in Canterbury, Maoriland, at the time, swagging it—me and Bill—looking for work on the new railway line. Well, one afternoon, after a long, hot tramp, we comes to Stiffner's Hotel—between Christchurch and that other place—I forget the name of it—with throats on us like sunstruck bones, and not the price of a stick of tobacco.

We had to have a drink, anyway, so we chanced it. We walked right into the bar, handed over our swags, put up four drinks, and tried to look as if we'd just drawn our cheques and didn't care a curse for any man. We looked solvent enough, as far as swagmen go. We were dirty and haggard and ragged and tired-looking, and that was all the more reason why we might have our cheques all right.

This Stiffner was a hard customer. He'd been a spieler, fighting man, bush parson, temperance preacher, and a policeman, and a commercial traveller, and everything else that was damnable; he'd been a journalist, and an editor; he'd been a lawyer, too. He was an ugly brute to look at, and uglier to have a row with—about six-foot-six, wide in proportion, and stronger than Donald Dinnie.

He was meaner than a gold-field Chinaman, and sharper than a sewer rat: he wouldn't give his own father a feed, nor lend him a sprat—unless some safe person backed the old man's I.O.U.

We knew that we needn't expect any mercy from Stiffner; but something had to be done, so I said to Bill:

“Something’s got to be done, Bill! What do you think of it?”

Bill was mostly a quiet young chap, from Sydney, except when he got drunk—which was seldom—and then he was a customer, from all round. He was cracked on the subject of spielers. He held that the population of the world was divided into two classes—one was spielers and the other was the mugs. He reckoned that he wasn’t a mug. At first I thought he was a spieler, and afterwards I thought that he was a mug. He used to say that a man had to do it these times; that he was honest once and a fool, and was robbed and starved in consequences by his friends and relations; but now he intended to take all that he could get. He said that you either had to have or be had; that men were driven to be sharps, and there was no help for it.

Bill said:

“We’ll have to sharpen our teeth, that’s all, and chew somebody’s lug.”

“How?” I asked.

There was a lot of navvies at the pub, and I knew one or two by sight, so Bill says:

“You know one or two of these mugs. Bite one of their ears.

“So I took aside a chap that I knowed and bit his ear for ten bob, and gave it to Bill to mind, for I thought it would be safer with him than with me.

“Hang on to that,” I says, “and don’t lose it for your natural life’s sake, or Stiffner’ll stiffen us.”

We put up about nine bob’s worth of drinks that night—me and Bill—and Stiffner didn’t squeal: he was too sharp.

He shouted once or twice.

By-and-by I left Bill and turned in, and in the morning when I woke up there was Bill sitting alongside of me, and looking about as lively as the fighting kangaroo in London in fog time. He had a black eye and eighteen pence. He'd been taking down some of the mugs.

"Well, what's to be done now?" I asked. "Stiffner can smash us both with one hand, and if we don't pay up he'll pound our swags and cripple us. He's just the man to do it. He loves a fight even more than he hates being had."

"There's only one thing to be done, Jim," says Bill, in a tired, disinterested tone that made me mad.

"Well, what's than" I said.

"Smoke!"

"Smoke be damned," I snarled, losing my temper.

"You know dashed well that our swags are in the bar, and we can't smoke without them.

"Well, then," says Bill, "I'll toss you to see who's to face the landlord."

"Well, I'll be blessed!" I says. "I'll see you further first. You have got a front. You mugged that stuff away, and you'll have to get us out of the mess."

It made him wild to be called a mug, and we swore and growled at each other for a while; but we daren't speak loud enough to have a fight, so at last I agreed to toss up for it, and I lost.

Bill started to give me some of his points, but I shut him up quick.

"You've had your turn, and made a mess of it," I said. "For God's sake give me a show. Now, I'll go into the bar and

ask for the swags, and carry them out on to the veranda, and then go back to settle up. You keep him talking all the time. You dump the two swags together, and smoke like sheol. That's all you've got to do."

I went into the bar, got the swags from the missus, carried them out on to the veranda, and then went back.

Stiffner came in.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning, sir," says Stiffner.

"It'll be a nice day, I think?"

"Yes, I think so. I suppose you are going on?"

"Yes, we'll have to make a move to-day."

Then I hooked carelessly on to the counter with one elbow, and looked dreamy-like out across the clearing, and presently I gave a sort of sigh and said: "Ah, well! I think I'll have a beer."

"Right you are! Where's your mate?"

"Oh, he's round at the back. He'll be round directly; but he ain't drinking this morning."

Stiffner laughed that nasty empty laugh of his. He thought Bill was whipping the cat.

"What's yours, boss?" I said.

"Thankee!... Here's luck!"

"Here's luck!"

The country was pretty open round there—the nearest timber was better than a mile away, and I wanted to give Bill a good start across the flat before the go-as-you-can commenced; so I talked for a while, and while we were talking I thought I might as well go the whole hog—I might as well die for a pound as a penny, if I had to die; and if I

hadn’t I’d have the pound to the good, anyway, so to speak. Anyhow, the risk would be about the same, or less, for I might have the spirit to run harder the more I had to run for —the more spirits I had to run for, in fact, as it turned out— so I says:

“I think I’ll take one of them there flasks of whisky to last us on the road.”

“Right y’are,” says Stiffner. “What’ll ye have—a small one or a big one?”

“Oh, a big one, I think—if I can get it into my pocket.”

“It’ll be a tight squeeze,” he said, and he laughed.

“I’ll try,” I said. “Bet you two drinks I’ll get it in.”

“Done!” he says. “The top inside coat-pocket, and no tearing.”

It was a big bottle, and all my pockets were small; but I got it into the pocket he’d betted against. It was a tight squeeze, but I got it in.

Then we both laughed, but his laugh was nastier than usual, because it was meant to be pleasant, and he’d lost two drinks; and my laugh wasn’t easy—I was anxious as to which of us would laugh next.

Just then I noticed something, and an idea struck me—about the most up-to-date idea that ever struck me in my life. I noticed that Stiffner was limping on his right foot this morning, so I said to him:

“What’s up with your foot?” putting my hand in my pocket. “Oh, it’s a crimson nail in my boot,” he said. “I thought I got the blanky thing out this morning; but I didn’t.”

There just happened to be an old bag of shoemaker’s tools in the bar, belonging to an old cobbler who was lying

dead drunk on the veranda. So I said, taking my hand out of my pocket again:

“Lend us the boot, and I’ll fix it in a minute. That’s my old trade.”

“Oh, so you’re a shoemaker,” he said. “I’d never have thought it.”

He laughs one of his useless laughs that wasn’t wanted, and slips off the boot—he hadn’t laced it up—and hands it across the bar to me. It was an ugly brute—a great thick, iron-bound, boiler-plated navvy’s boot. It made me feel sore when I looked at it.

I got the bag and pretended to fix the nail; but I didn’t.

“There’s a couple of nails gone from the sole,” I said. “I’ll put ’em in if I can find any hobnails, and it’ll save the sole,” and I rooted in the bag and found a good long nail, and shoved it right through the sole on the sly. He’d been a bit of a sprinter in his time, and I thought it might be better for me in the near future if the spikes of his running-shoes were inside.

“There, you’ll find that better, I fancy,” I said, standing the boot on the bar counter, but keeping my hand on it in an absent-minded kind of way. Presently I yawned and stretched myself, and said in a careless way:

“Ah, well! How’s the slate?” He scratched the back of his head and pretended to think.

“Oh, well, we’ll call it thirty bob.”

Perhaps he thought I’d slap down two quid.

“Well,” I says, “and what will you do supposing we don’t pay you?”

He looked blank for a moment. Then he fired up and gasped and choked once or twice; and then he cooled down suddenly and laughed his nastiest laugh—he was one of those men who always laugh when they're wild—and said in a nasty, quiet tone:

"You thundering, jumped-up crawlers! If you don't (something) well part up I'll take your swags and (something) well kick your gory pants so you won't be able to sit down for a month—or stand up either!"

"Well, the sooner you begin the better," I said; and I chucked the boot into a corner and bolted.

He jumped the bar counter, got his boot, and came after me. He paused to slip the boot on—but he only made one step, and then gave a howl and slung the boot off and rushed back. When I looked round again he'd got a slipper on, and was coming—and gaining on me, too. I shifted scenery pretty quick the next five minutes. But I was soon pumped. My heart began to beat against the ceiling of my head, and my lungs all choked up in my throat. When I guessed he was getting within kicking distance I glanced round so's to dodge the kick. He let out; but I shied just in time. He missed fire, and the slipper went about twenty feet up in the air and fell in a waterhole.

He was done then, for the ground was stubbly and stony. I seen Bill on ahead pegging out for the horizon, and I took after him and reached for the timber for all I was worth, for I'd seen Stiffner's missus coming with a shovel—to bury the remains, I suppose; and those two were a good match—Stiffner and his missus, I mean.