

# **BARNEYS AUCTIONS**

**By Uncle Jasper**

ISBN 978-0-9954192-4-7 (e-book)

Copyright© 2018 by Uncle Jasper  
jasperlawson@hotmail.com

All rights reserved. The book contains material protected under international and national copyright laws and treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without express permission from the publisher.

Other books by this author

Derek Vortimer, MBA – Manager Of Worlds (ebook, 2018)

Detective In Time (ebook, 2018)

Queen Purrpuss & Owl (ebook, 2018)

The Young Marvel (ebook, 2018)

Cover image: shutterstock

Barney O'Connell was an old Grump He didn't mind who he offended as long as they came to his auctions and bid. He liked those who stood up to him, except for his daughter, Kathleen. He left school before the Nuns got around to teaching him the grammatical uses of the apostrophe.

## Chapter – 1

In 1949 about three and a half years after the war ended, Barney found what he was looking for.

What he saw was a large, ungainly building, lingering in spite of the modernity that was creeping up on it. The odd looking structure fronted one of the main roads into the city. It had been built with a timber frame, the rest corrugated iron. Dilapidated, neglected.

Nailed to the centre one of the three large double doors a roughly painted sign proclaimed - **For rent ask at forge**. It too was weather beaten, and could have been nailed to the door months ago.

Barney stopped his car and went into the dingy interior of the forge. It was warm. Dimly lit by the fire, which had been allowed to die down. An elderly man sat on a rickety wooden kitchen chair and puffed tobacco smoke from a pipe with a short, curved stem. He wore a blacksmith's leather apron which fell to below his knees when he stood up.

"How much rent do you want for this old dump?" asked Barney.."

"Go in first, if yer like, and have a squiz at them." The man indicated a door that opened into the darkness of the middle store. "Lift the bar and open them front doors to let some light in and yer can have a good look round. Just close the doors and put the bars back where they were when yer finish.'

"No lights?"

"Nuh! Yer can open them big doors, or strike matches, just as yer like."

"I wouldn't take a match in there, everything's dried out and ready to burn, the place'd go up like a bonfire.'

"Just as yer like,' said the man. 'It's five quid a week."

Barney went in and unbarred the double doors which opened flat against the front of the building, partly obscuring the windows.

The building was divided into three. That is three large sheds made out of one very large shed and separated by flimsy interior walls.

It was big enough for what he wanted. A few bags of produce of some kind lay on low platforms that had been built around the walls which were of rusty corrugated iron, obviously second hand. The sun's rays pierced a few nail holes in the roof and directed downwards narrow little shafts of light through which dust motes were brightly illuminated as they floated by.

He soon found another door which opened into the third tenement. It was exactly the same size and appearance as the two others.

Satisfied that it was what he wanted Barney returned to the forge. 'I could use it,' he said. 'But the rent's a killer. I could go to three pound ten for this old rat castle but that's really straining the budget. I'll pay fortnightly in advance, too.'

"I keep tellin' yer,' said the blacksmith. 'It's five pounds."

"Well, it's going to be empty for a long time if you can't do any better than that.

'Yer a hard man

"No I'm not, but I'm full bottle on the subject of rents, and you're asking too much.

The blacksmith knew how long it was since he had painted the sign and nailed it to the door. A few people had made enquiries about the property but they wanted him to knock down the old structure and put up modern shops in its place, then they would consider renting. Barney was the best prospect that had walked into the place for months, and he was talking about cash in hand.

"Alright,' he said, 'Four pound ten, but I can't go any lower than that."

"Yes you can. I should have me head read, but I'll go to four quid, that's me final offer. When I come back next month it'll be three pound ten shillings, and after that, ten shillings less, down to three pounds."

"Alright," said the blacksmith. "Yer not a bad bloke so I'll give you a bargain. Four quid, and I want two weeks in advance."

"OK' said Barney. 'It's against my better judgement, but I don't mind starving." He put a five pound note down on the anvil, and three one pound notes.

"I've run out of receipts," said the blacksmith. 'I been meaning to get another book, but I been busy and haven't had a chance."

"It doesn't matter, old timer, where I come from a hand-shake is better than a receipt any day. My name's Barney, and I'll be back tomorrow morning at six o'clock."

"Me name's George," said the blacksmith to Barney as he departed.

George was not unhappy at being beaten down by his tenant. Four pounds was not too bad a rent for the times. "While the war and the petrol rationing was on there were horses everywhere," he told acquaintances afterwards. "Now the rationing's finished, me business'll go the same way. All the cockies round here are buying trucks and cars now to cart their stuff to market, and that's no good to me. I'll keep the forge going for a while but if I can get two quid a week rent for it I'll retire. That'll be six quid a week altogether for the missus and me, we can live on that."

Barney arrived next morning in a blitz buggy bought in a government disposal sale. It had travelled thousands of miles through the outback during the war and had once been shot at during a Japanese air raid on Darwin. It still had bullet holes in it as a memento of the occasion.

Barney said six o'clock and he meant it. He turned up on time in the battle weary old vehicle, but the blacksmith was not yet there.

This did not deter Barney. After getting out his tools and fiddling with the ancient lock on the door he managed to open it and went in through the blacksmith's premises to get to his own. He lifted the bar and pushed open the two doors of the end tenement. It was the one furthest from the forge. Sunshine flooded the interior showing how old, how dilapidated it was, how dusty.

"Come on, Kath," he said to his passenger. "You start untying the ropes and I'll stack these bags out of the way until we can get rid of them."

The builder of the shed must have had some timber left over and built a low platform around the wall. A few bags of horse feed were lying on it.

'Yuck!' said Kathleen, Barney's daughter, gazing with disgust at the spider webs that were everywhere, and the haze of dust that had been stirred up by their feet. 'You're not going to start a business here, are you?'

Barney had already hoisted a bag to his shoulder, but looked round with surprise. "Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"It's old, it's dirty, it's horrible, it's full of spider webs, and it's going to fall down one day."

"Well, it won't fall down today, and when I get enough stock in it won't be able to. Now forget about the spiders and just untie the ropes. I want to get a second load in before dark, and another in the morning for a six o'clock start."

"I'm not working here. You didn't say anything about spiders so you can do it all yourself."

"Bloody women! Well, I'm not going to pay you for not working"

"I don't expect you to. I'll wait outside until you finish."

Barney had stacked the truck almost beyond its capacity, but it still operated and had got them there. In a bad mood he started to throw back the ropes that had stopped much of the load from tumbling off as they jolted towards their destination.

A gaunt man in his mid twenties, leaning against a door post with arms folded, had been watching this little difference between father and daughter. He had an appreciative eye for Kathleen who was just twenty two, had dark hair like her father, but was much better looking.

He came forward. "G'day Boss," he said, do you want a hand?"

Barney looked at him. "You're a bloody walking skeleton," he said. "What makes you think you can do any hard yakka?"

"That's alright, I'm plumping up nicely. I was a guest of the Emperor of Japan for three and a half years, mostly in Changi or on the railway. You should'a seen me when I first arrived home. I was crook in hospital for a long while after, but I'm alright now."

"Yair. I was in motor parts procurements during the war, that wasn't much fun either, and now, me daughter's walked off the job on account of some bloody spiders."

"Well, I can help. I'm stronger than I look. What are you offering?"

"Two and six an hour."

"Well, eight hours is worth a quid. It's six now and if I work to four you'll owe me twenty five bob."

"It's a quarter past and the clock's ticking, now start undoing those ropes, and if anything looks like it's going to fall on you give me a hoy."

"Sounds alright by me. Let's get into it. By the way, my name's Don."

"Yair, I'm Barney."

Barney had a lot on the truck. There were wardrobes, dressing tables, mattresses, kitchen tables, and chairs, tools pictures. There were ornaments too, they were wrapped in paper and packed inside the wardrobes

"Where'd all this come from?" asked Don as they emptied the truck and ranged its contents on the platform around the walls."

"It's from me shop in Carlton. It was too small, and anyway it's gunna be pulled down next month. I should'a been out weeks ago but I only found this place yesterday and had to act fast."

"Yair, I was talking to George and he said you were moving in today, but he didn't know what business you were in. What have you got, a second hand joint?"

"That's it. Everything bought and sold. I reckon I could run an auction room out of here. Anyway I'm going to give it a go. I've applied for an auctioneer's license."

"I hope you get it. And what happened to the blitz buggy? It's full of holes."

"Yair, they tell me it was on the wharf in Darwin when the Japs were bombing the place and sinking ships in the harbour. Some of our blokes had machine guns and took them on. Anyway, one of Jap planes flew low over the water and the machine gunners were tracking it as it went past. They didn't notice the old buggy until it got in the way, by then it was full of holes, the driver evacuated in time, though he might have evacuated in more ways than one."

As soon as everything was off and stacked against the walls, Don threw all the ropes and packing into the back of the truck while Barney dragged the doors shut and dropped the bar into place.

George the blacksmith had watched all this with great interest. No horses had been brought in that day to be shod so he had plenty of time to look on and marvel at Barney's energy.

He was told he would have to come at six every morning or else give his tenant a spare key. He didn't mind that. There was nothing in the forge worth taking. The anvil was too heavy to lift without a crane, and no one wanted blacksmithing tools anyway, it was a dying trade. They could come in by way of the forge if they wanted to.'

Kathleen was squeezed between the two men on the front seat as they returned to Carlton, an inner suburb of Melbourne. She made it quite clear to her father that if he wanted to employ her in this new business he would have to eliminate the spiders, and their webs, and do something to make the premises a bit more presentable.

Barney drove grim faced while being lectured, but Don filled any spaces in the conversation with tales of his three days of fighting in Singapore, his three years of detention in Japanese prison camps, and the months in hospital afterwards.

## **Chapter – 2**

The same day that Barney's Auctions opened for business Don's employment was made permanent. Barney went out a lot, inspecting furniture for sale or attending auctions. Don stayed behind to look after the business, and acted as storeman during the auctions.

One day Barney went to an auction where thirty rolls of linoleum floor covering, the property of an insurance company, were on sale. He came to an arrangement with a fellow dealer not to bid against each other and they took fifteen rolls each

The lino was in tightly wrapped cylinders about six feet long and when standing on end were taller than either of the two men. A carrier brought them on the day following the auction. Barney, stubborn as usual, and in spite of the well founded doubts of Don, insisted on leaning them against the side wall.

He had a verbal battle with the carrier who was in the union and refused to do more than help lower the rolls off his truck to the ground. Barney contended that it was part of his duty to assist carrying them inside but the man stood by his principles and refused to stir from the back of the truck. Unions were something else that Barney detested.

The wooden trolleys used to wheel in the weighty rolls were second hand. They were heavy and big with steel wheels and they had to drag them loaded with one roll a time across the room and up the extra foot on to the platform.

The fifteen rolls of lino were almost all in, standing on end, and leaning against the wall that separated them from the forge when fate intervened.

Barney's temper was not improved when the blacksmith came in to complain about a bulge that had appeared on his side of the wall. He had heard a creaking noise too, as though it was under strain.

Barney guessed the distortion was caused by the stack of lino. but he said there was no problem. George was not satisfied; he insisted it was no laughing matter and if Barney brought any more lino in he was likely to push the whole building over and involve them both in ruin.

She's as sweet as a nut," said Barney. "That wall'd stand up to twice the weight. If you're worried we'll bring some rolls into the forge and lean them against the wall on your side, that should do the trick." To prove the solidity of the wall he kicked the nearest roll of lino. A sudden cracking noise followed. Some vertical studs scraped loose at the bottom and shot outwards into the forge. They were followed by the fifteen rolls of lino which fell through onto the floor while the top of one landed in the fire causing an eruption of sparks and flame.

"Jeez!", said Don. "What a dill! Stubborn old bugger." He grabbed a bucket and dipped into the vat of water alongside the anvil, George, the blacksmith, did the same and they threw water on the fire until the forge was full of smoke, steam and flying ash as well as the stink of frying lino.

The blacksmith was aggrieved by the accident. "You're bloody hopeless, Barney. I'll have to get the fire going again, there are some horses coming over and the owner wants them shod today. What the hell did you think you were doing, leaning all them heavy rolls of lino against the wall? You should'a known they wouldn't take the weight." "You'll have to take all this stuff out pronto. I've got a business to run here."

"Don, give him your bucket!"

"A bucket?" said the outraged blacksmith, "What the hell do I want a bucket for?"

Barney glared at him, hands on hips. "You can cry into it. You're not going to weep on my shoulder; I got work to do."

"Bloody oath you've got work to do. You're to get all this lino off my floor, and put the wall back the way it was."

He was shouting but Barney quietened him with a gesture. "No, listen. I should have me head read, but I like this place and I'll buy it from you, money in hand, and kiss you goodbye. Now, old timer, what's your price."

The blacksmith was taken aback. 'I don't know. I've never thought of selling the place. As far as I'm concerned it's money in the bank, and I can sell it when prices go up.'

'You'll be waiting a long time. Alright, we'll talk about it later.' Barney had been distracted by the sight of a vehicle that had pulled up in front of his premises.

A man had driven up in an antique motor car. The vehicle had a brass framed oval radiator and fastened to it was a metal badge representing crossed cannon barrels. A gas producer had been welded on to the folding luggage carrier at the back with two bags of charcoal tied alongside as fuel.

Barney paid no attention to the gas producer. These devices were a war time invention to make up for the shortage of petrol. It was discovered that gas from burning coke would do the job well enough. Most were dumped as soon as petrol rationing ended.

Barney was looking instead at furniture tied inexpertly to the broad, flat roof of the car.

"May I speak to the manager?" asked the driver getting out in front of the auction room. He had on an old fashioned flat motoring cap and an ankle length dust coat.

"He went mad and they shot him. What do you want?"

"Are you the manager?"

"No, I sweep the joint, and if you think this is the garbage tip think again, the nearest one's about five miles that way." He gestured vaguely with his thumb.

"My wife told me to bring some furniture here for sale by auction, but first I wish to discuss the matter with the manager."

"What's to discuss? We'll drag it off and sell it for you next Wednesday, no worries. We only charge ten percent commission."

"Yes, but I want a reserve placed on the furniture.. I want to see the manager and discuss the matter before I leave anything for sale. My wife was most insistent that I place an upset price with your firm so her furniture would not be sold too cheaply. We have heard that in auction rooms sometimes goods are almost given away."

Without comment Barney climbed on to the running board and stood on the little door mat fastened there by the makers so that fastidious travellers could wipe their feet before entering the vehicle. The rear half of the car was completely enclosed for the comfort of passengers but the driver was shielded by nothing but the windscreen and the roof.

Behind the driver was a small, sliding glass window, and through it he could receive his instructions from the car's owner

An Edwardian dining suite had been loaded into and on top of the old car. On the roof was a plush-covered, roll end couch with a carved lion's head snarling from the centre of the roll, the bottom half of a sideboard, an extension table with its legs sticking in the air, all made of light coloured oak.

Packed into the passengers' compartment were six old dining chairs and two elbow chairs, nicely carved and upholstered in plush, together with the mirror top unscrewed from the sideboard.

"We have had these things a number of years," explained the customer. My wife decided she wanted new furniture so we invested in a walnut veneer dining suite with frosted glass doors on the buffet."

Barney shook his head. "Just like a woman! I know my wife is never happy unless she's spending my dough. Take my advice, Pop, don't you put up with it! Women get ideas like this. You gotta show her who's boss at your place."

The customer raised his eyebrows at this. "It's too late. We already know who's boss in our house - she is! But to get back to the subject, she told me she wanted to put an upset price of twenty five pounds on what we have here." He gestured towards the car.

Without answering Barney roared a couple of times into the recesses of the auction room for Don. Presently Don, who had been shifting the lino, appeared on the footpath and sprang to a mock salute. "Reporting for duty, sir," he said.

"Give him a match."

Don, who was wearing a carrier's white apron, though rather dirty, reached into the big pocket in front and produced a box of safety matches.

"Give it to him," ordered Barney, indicating the customer who looked at the match and looked at Barney.

"Go on, have one and you can take your stuff a long way from here and set fire to it. A match is about the cheapest thing you can get these days and it's your best chance to clean up this old junk."

"What do you mean? This furniture is craftsman built; no one could make anything like it these days. twenty five pounds is a very reasonable price."

Barney now had his arm round the other's shoulder in a fatherly manner. "Of course it is. You're right, you're dead right; in fact I know a man down at the blind asylum, if he could see it he'd give you twenty five quid, no trouble at all."

The customer, who was fascinated and overwhelmed by Barney's personality, made no attempt to shrug the arm from his shoulders and Barney continued, shaking him a little to emphasise each point.

"You young blokes," he said, "that go scorching round the country in hot rod motor cars."

The man glanced at his ancient vehicle. It could have been wound up to about forty miles an hour in an emergency; but he said nothing.

"You young blokes with leather jackets and knuckle dusters splashing your money around giving girls expensive walnut veneer dining suites, you've got to face up to reality. These are modern times, you see. Your missus, she wants new furniture; well, so does everyone else. You say it's good workmanship, right! go to the top of the class. But who wants quality now? Who wants workmanship? People nowadays are like the little woman; they want veneer; they want frosted glass; they want stuff that's slapped together with glue and tacks. Give it a good kick in the arse and what happens? it falls apart in a cloud of bulldust. but who cares? That's what they want, that's what they get. Now I can see you're a man of taste and discernment, so I'll tell you something." He paused but the bemused customer did not argue.

"One of these days people are going to wake up to what the manufacturers are doing to them. When all this junk furniture is clapped out they'll come looking for the good stuff they threw away. Take my word for it. Keep this suite another twenty years or so and it will be worth real money. Now, be firm with your missus; go home, tell her you changed your mind and you're going to keep the good furniture and throw out the junk, instead of the other way round. Go home now, be firm with her! Tell her I said so."

The man shook his head silently.

"You reckon she won't come at it?"

He shook his head again.

"Are you a man or a mouse? Lead the revolution of downtrodden men and strike a blow for husbands everywhere. I mean to say I'll come with you and hold the back door open while you make your getaway. I'll even help you carry out the walnut veneer suite and bring it down here for sale."

There was a negative response to this proposition also.

"Can't I sell this furniture at any price?" asked the man.

"Yes you can, my boy. I'm not saying you can't, but it's the price, you see. Everything in the world has a price, but for this stuff it's pretty low. You're asking twenty quid, well that's putting a hurdle in the way that a kangaroo couldn't jump over. Now I've given you some good advice about how to straighten out your marriage and keep this nice old suite at the same time. But if you're not game to take my advice we have to consider what happens next. I tell you what I'll do; we'll haul it all inside, put it up for auction on Wednesday and sell for the best price. We charge ten percent commission but I won't take a penny reserve. If it sells for a quid the lot that's too bad; but I don't want you or the missus grizzling at me about the price afterwards.

A reserve price and you can take your match and go, no reserve and we'll put it in the auction and do the best we can for you."

"You're not giving me much choice," complained the customer.

"You're another helpless victim of fashion," said Barney "I've seen it so often in this line of business. There was a strong man in here yesterday, just like you. You should'a seen him cry when he was telling me how much his missus had cost him over the years: it cut into his drinking money, and he couldn't afford more than five packs of smokes a day because of her wasteful ways."

"These women are all the same; they want what the mob wants. You can haul your furniture to every auction room in Melbourne and you'll find it the same old story; junk they want, because they can sell it. Good stuff like this, no, because it's old fashioned."

The customer at last gave in to this flood of eloquence, left the furniture for unreserved sale. Instantly Barney and Don started to unload the old car and with a good deal of quarrelling, exhortation and banter they had the suite set up and displayed as well as possible on the already crowded auction platform.

"Who is that man? Does he own the business?" enquired the customer as Mrs Spear, newly hired to do the office work, wrote a receipt for the goods.

"He certainly is," said the lady. "He's a stubborn, workaholic eccentric, and he'd better build me an office because I'm not going to sit at a kitchen table taken out of stock and no way of filing anything except holding the papers down with bricks."

The customer took the ticket and eyed it dubiously. "We may not get much for the suite but at least I have met three originals today. I must make a point of coming to the auction."

He went off to face his wife, but first had to start the engine of his car. It was a complex operation. With a small hearth shovel he topped up the supply of glowing charcoal in the gas producer. and adjusted various valves and controls attached by baling wire. Each of the four engine cylinders had to be primed from a precious reserve of petrol. With a can and funnel he introduced a few drops through four small metal cups in the cylinder head. He explained to Don, who was watching with great interest that the engine ran satisfactorily on charcoal gas but needed petrol to kick it off. After the engine had been primed the four cylinder cocks were turned off so no compression could escape. The final test was to see if the machine would actually go after all these preparations. The engine chattered into life at the first swing of the starting handle and the man ran and leapt into the driver's seat before it could die away again. He nodded to Don and drove off. The long handled gear lever and hand-brake were both mounted outside the car and as the speed increased Don could see the driver's hand changing gear.

### **Chapter – 3**

Soon after eight o'clock one morning two men went to view an old house under sentence of demolition. It had stood unremarked in a shady street for over seventy years, soundly built, in the fashion of its day, of coloured handmade bricks and lime mortar with a slate roof now crusted with moss.

Across the front of the house was a veranda roofed with corrugated iron. Under the edge of the veranda roof an iron, lacework frieze almost concealed by ivy and supported by fluted iron columns, all resisted neglect and age. The veranda floor was paved with terra-cotta tiles decorated in a fleur-de-lis pattern and finished off with a basalt coping stone from which one could step down a few inches to the weedy lawn. The floor was starting to subside so the tiles were cracking here and there. In the middle of the veranda were two steps, also of basalt

stone, flanked by terra-cotta urns and leading down to a yellow gravel path almost washed away and overgrown.

The veranda had sheltered generations of children, adults, and animals in its time. For almost forty years a sulphur crested cockatoo had lived in the house to be put out on the veranda in mild weather chained to a galvanized iron perch. It passed its days screeching now and then or repeating familiar phrases in a low, scratchy voice. It greeted visitors with more screeching and bobbing up and down on its perch.

The veranda had shielded the front of the house from hot sunlight and driving rain. Now the children and adults, dogs, cats, and the cockie had all gone their way leaving the trees and bushes to flourish for lack of a restraining hand.

A Moreton Bay fig tree had come to dominate the front garden stretching its vast limbs over house and lawn alike. The ground was now seamed and bisected with big, knotty tree roots that had gradually wrenched themselves from the soil, until there was no more smooth ground, only barren earth littered with broad leaves fallen from the tree.

Seventy years before Edward Sturgess and his wife, lately emigrated from England, had bought the land, distant from the city, for £35 and had built on it a very fine house, now hopelessly dated and old fashioned.

The house was uneconomic. Even more so was the tree which clutched greedily at hundreds of square feet of valuable real estate. Both would have to go to make room for a block of flats.

While the men were sitting in the cabin of their truck surveying the decaying house and garden the solicitor they had come to meet drove into the street and stopped his car behind them.

They got out, greeted one another, and pushed at the shabby wicket gate until it scraped open against the gravel path, which divided on either side of the tree to meet again at the front steps. It had rained during the night and they were forced to duck now and then to avoid water sodden bushes which overhung the path.

At the front door Wilkie, the solicitor, produced an old fashioned key tied with string to a cardboard label,

"I didn't know old Teddy Sturgess lived here," said Chip Dowd, one of the men, glancing round. "I guess it would have been a pretty good house in its day; o'course it's had the gong now."

"It's still sound," said the solicitor, who had opened the door after trouble with the key, "but it would be expensive to restore and people don't want old houses like this nowadays; they're a drug on the market."

"It's better than the old weatherboard joints we're renting," commented Tom Neerim, Dowd's mate. "I wouldn't mind having it. How long did Teddy live here?"

"The executor told me he lived in the house all his life with his sister Violet until she passed away some years ago and he died in his bed here last August. Neither of them married and a niece and nephew have inherited the estate. There was no will, of course, but they are the only known relatives. There should be no problems with probate, and the Trustee wants everything cleared up as quickly as possible."

"We wondered why we hadn't seen him for a while," said Tom peering into the dimness of the long passage which bisected the house. "He was lucky, his old man left him this place. He wouldn't have been smart enough to get one for himself."

"Chip was unusually animated as he reminisced about the late Mr Sturgess. "He was an old ratbag, that bloke. Gawd, some of the things he used to get up to! He was as mad as two bob watch."

The solicitor pursed his lips but said nothing.

"He was dead nuts on taking people to court and he was always after the Prime Minister or the Minister of Transport to get them up before the beak, or trying to collect damages from some poor bunny."

"Yes," agreed the solicitor. I suppose it was common knowledge that he was eccentric. He approached me once to start proceedings against the Commonwealth Electoral Office because he had been beaten in a Senate election. He was convinced that the returning officer had rigged the votes against him."

"Yair, I remember; he stood for the Vegetarian party and was going to abolish gambling, and drinking. That'd go over pretty big with the local publicans and SP bookies. How did you get on with the court case?"

"I didn't. I refused to proceed in the matter and advised him to forget it. Not that he did, of course. There are a lot of old law books in the house, so he conducted the case himself. After that he was declared a vexatious litigant and he couldn't sue anyone without the permission of the court."

"That was old Teddy, alright. It wouldn't have stopped him. Do you remember the time he tried to get a license to start a bus line? They wouldn't give him permission to sell bus tickets but no one could stop him selling lollies and ice-cream. Everyone that got on to the bus had to buy a bag of lollies or an ice cream. Then they got a free bus ride. The business went bust, of course. It couldn't do anything else, not with Teddy in charge."

The solicitor was interested by these tales of his late client but he had other things to do. He said, "Well, I am glad you told me all this but we did not come here to discuss Mr Sturgess's activities. What I have to get from you is a price for the demolition of the house."

"It won't be any picnic bowling over the old tree and grubbing out the stump," said Tom.

"Oh, forget the tree. We'll get the professionals in. I should think you would need specialized equipment for a big job like that. Just give us a price for the house alone."

The two men examined the house critically. They fingered the cast iron lace work that hung like rusty tapestry from the edge of the veranda roof. They kicked at the handmade bricks to see how easily they crumbled and pulled at the wooden laths where some plaster had fallen away in the hall. They examined the long passage that ran through the centre of the house. It was lit with a dusty rose colour from light leaking through the bright red decorated glass surround of the front door.

Most of the rooms were filled with old furniture and trash. Brass bedsteads set with artificial rubies: Decrepit wardrobes and chests: A mahogany hall-stand with bevelled mirrors and brass rails: Disintegrating wicker chairs and wash stands with chipped marble tops: Great bundles of newspapers that turned out on closer inspection to be decaying copies of the *Age* and *Argus* and various Henry George and Douglas Credit publications. They found an antique electric belt with an appendage. It had been devised and discreetly advertised by a long gone professor as an aid to the restoration of male health and virility. The finders thought it long past its use by date and threw it to one side.

One room was so filled with miscellaneous and unrelated articles and furniture that there was no place to stand and Tom Neerim had to walk precariously, as though on stepping stones, across to the window to raise the blind so they could survey it all.

The blind tore in his hand and he impatiently wrenched it down in a torrent of dust to let in the light. The room was like a dusty, untidy warehouse, crammed full, except for where a space had been left that was sufficient to let the door swing open. It was cluttered with neglected furniture, pots and pans, ice chests, books, steamer trunks, and discarded mementoes of a lost Edwardian age.

"Where the hell did he get all this junk from?" Tom wanted to know. "He must have spent years collecting it and dumping it in the house."

"Some of it came from Barney's place," said Chip. "He went to every sale for months and bought heaps of stuff no one else would touch. Then he got crook on Barney over something or other and Barney turfed him out of the joint."

"It is just as well O'Connell did stop him from buying," interposed the solicitor drily. "if he had filled the place completely with this class of merchandise we would really have a problem on our hands. As it is you will have to allow for disposal of it all in your price."

"Yair, but Ken, what if there is anything valuable in this heap of kak, what happens then?"

"I can tell you, I had some valuers down and they said it was not worth carting away, and considering Sturgess's limited means and his taste in auction purchases, I doubt that the question will arise. If you can dispose of anything you find in the house at a profit, do so by all means. I am sure the heirs will not enter an objection. They have examined the house and taken anything of value, which was not much. All we want now is to clear the block as soon as possible."

"Is there anything out the back?"

"Yes. Sheds, outbuildings, assorted scrap-iron; everything has to go. There is even a motor car out there you will have to remove. I want you to clear everything off the block, except the tree - put it all down in the price."

Outside, in a leaky shed made of hand split palings and corrugated iron, they found an old car. It was a Dodge Six, that is six cylinders, with wooden spoked wheels and flat tyres. Once this old car had been a decent looking sedan but someone, probably the industrious Mr Sturgess, had hacked away the back of the body. Everything behind the front seat had gone and been replaced with a flat, wooden tray bolted to the chassis.

"It'd probably still go, you know," opined Tom, "you couldn't stop these old sods with an axe. You remember the way the Dodges used to keep going, don't you, Chip?"

"Too right. My old man had one like this, same model, I think. She'd plug away all day, as long as you liked. She was a real bottler."

"Yair, I know. At night you'd just give her a kick in the behind and leave her out in the rain. It didn't matter, as long as you kept the coil dry. Start her up next day and off she'd go like a beaut."

"That reminds me," muttered the solicitor fumbling through a folder of papers he carried with him. He produced a registration label for the old car. It was a current label that would not expire for another three months. "If your price is satisfactory you can have it, if it is of any use. I found it amongst his papers only the other day and there is so little time for it to run it hardly seemed worth while trying to get a refund on the unexpired portion."

The two contractors were delighted with this offer. "You little beauty!" said Tom. "If we can start this old bomb we'll slap the label on. She'll come in handy hauling stuff to the tip. We could use another truck. Old Gasper still chuffs along but she's not getting any younger."

"Who is," asked the solicitor, "but I have to leave you now. Of course whether or not you get the job depends on your price. In the meantime, if you will excuse me, I will lock up the house and leave you. Don't forget I want the quote in writing and I want it this week. If it is not in this week we will have to get someone else to do the job. Another thing, any contract will have to include a penalty clause; the job must be finished by the end of next month."

He locked the house, took the key, and left them in the back-yard to wander about beating the grass and weeds to locate the various items of rusty machinery that were mouldering away where the eccentric Mr Sturgess had left them.

"I reckon we could have the house down and the land cleared in a month," ventured Chip.

"Yair, a lot of them weatherboards and junk we can burn on the block. There won't be any fire danger days for a few months yet, so we should be sweet. The scrap-iron should sell alright and the oregon and stuff like that out of the house we can sell here or bundle up and take it down for Barney to sell. Most of the junk in the house too, we can put it straight in the auction."

"Ah, bull! He'd throw it at you if you brought it into his place; you know how he goes on when we bring in stuff he doesn't want."

"I dunno. He sold most of it once to Teddy; if he can sell it once he might be able to do it again. We can't be shot for trying and if we can pick up any dough like that, it's all bunce."

"Chip Dowd scratched his mop of fair hair and shrugged. "Alright, but you still gotta work out a price for Ken Wilkie. If it's not right we'll end up getting bugger-all."

"She'll be right pal. Don't get 'em in a knot. We'll work out a price tonight and Marie can write to Wilkie for us. Come on, we'd better get back to Barney's and see if there's any more work on."

## **Chapter – 4**

The rolls of lino lay all night where they had fallen, half in Barney's establishment and half in the forge, protruding through the crumpled wall Barney and his staff were too busy to move them all; they were preparing the room for Wednesday's auction. Everything had to be stacked in the order of sale while carriers and people driving cars with loaded trailers turned up bearing fresh consignments of furniture and odds and ends, all to be listed, numbered and auctioned without reserve.

Barney had rung Marie Neerim soon after the mishap with the lino to say that her husband and Chip Dowd were to come as soon as possible and start moving the rolls and repairing the wall, but the two men were not to be found. They had gone off on a job somewhere and were expected back about tea time.

Barney and Marie had a spirited argument on the telephone about the absence of the two men. Barney was of the opinion they should be around when required but Mrs Neerim retorted that they had other things to do and couldn't come running just because Barney wanted them; they would go broke if they relied on casual work at the auction room. She finished the

conversation by giving him a firm ticking off for his rudeness and lack of consideration. Barney enjoyed the argument. He liked Marie, she was one of his favourites.

It was important to get the job fixed as soon as possible. Nothing could be done on Wednesday, and Barney did not want the men moving the lino or fixing the wall because they would be in the retail section of his premises.

Wednesday was auction day and the retail section would be closed and barred. It was a strict, though eccentric rule of the business that no retail sales were conducted, and all retail customers were turned away while the auction was in progress. If the contractors were working in that department they might be tempted to sell something or talk to retail customers.

The men appeared in the middle of the afternoon. They were in two vehicles stacked high with furniture. One was their decaying tip truck which was chattering and rattling towards its final end, the other was the cut down Dodge car, it had been resurrected from the weeds and rubbish through abuse and effort, and Chip's special skill as a mechanic.

Don glanced out at them through the door then put his hands over his eyes to shut out the sight. Both trucks were laden with chattels and old furniture removed from the Sturgess house.

"Oh, no!" he said as the men alighted and came up to him with beaming smiles. "It's not true - you can't do this. Listen, you blokes, you've got it wrong; stuff goes from here to the tip, not the other way round.

"There's no doubt about it, Don," said Tom Neerim grinning broadly, "you're lucky to have mates like us; we could have taken this anywhere, but no, we brought it to you, our old china."

"Where the hell have you been?" shouted Barney, bursting out of the auction room, "never around when you're needed, are you? and what's all this kak?" He shook one of the ropes securing the load on the tip truck.

"We been at the old Sturgess place since six o'clock. Ken Wilkie rang last night to say they were in hurry to get it flattened because the team that's going to take out the tree has been booked for the first of next month, and he accepted our price over the phone.

We were there first thing this morning to pull the lead flashing off the roof and strip the brass fittings out of the house before any tea-leaf could knock them off. We got a decent price at the scrap metal yard; that's a good start on pulling the old place down."

"That doesn't explain what you're doing with all this clapped out old, junk furniture; are you taking it somewhere?"

"Yes, me boy, to you. We had all these lovely antiques to dispose of and you were the first one we thought of -- you're lucky to have friends like us. Come on, Chip, get the ropes off."

Barney had cast a practised eye over the load and was soon satisfied that most of it was saleable, but he was not going to admit that to the two men.

"You're joking!" he complained. "I've seen better stuff sinking in to the West Melbourne swamp. I reckon you knocked this off from the Salvation Army depot. I got a job for you; it'll be better than trying to unload all this useless junk into the auction; why didn't you throw a few matches around in the house and shut the door?"

While he was talking in this vein the two men were casting off the ropes, quite unconcerned by his criticism. From one of the trucks Tom took two chamber pots, one slightly cracked, and a large bedroom jug all decorated with a pattern of roses and twining leaves. He handed these to Barney.

"Don't drop them," he cautioned. "Those thunder mugs are worth a quid each, if they're a worth a penny. They got a thousand and one uses around the home. I was reading on our table-cloth the other day about an artist who uses them to mix up his paint in; and look at that!" he said, slapping the side of a shabby piece of furniture that was about to be taken off the truck. "That's a genuine cedar duchess chest, and the mirror's not broken. Run a coat of tan boot polish over it and you'd get fifteen quid for it on a dark night with a gun."

Don recognized the piece being praised and turned to Barney. "I know that old dressing table. It was the last thing Teddy Sturgess ever bought off us. You two had a blue over something or other and I remember, as well as anything, him driving away in the old Dodge with the chest on the back. He was zig-zagging down the road and hanging out of the window and screaming abuse at you. He said he was going to sue for slander and mental anguish. What was all that about? I meant to ask you before, but it slipped my mind."

"Ah," replied Barney, "Teddy and the old boy next door to him got hold of a lease on a gold mine near Majorca. It's all clapped out now, it stands to reason, the miners in the early days wouldn't have left the place if there was any gold there, and Majorca's on it last legs. Anyway, just before the war someone with more money than sense built a poppet head over the shaft and tried to work it for a while. When they went broke Teddy and his mate hopped in and bought the lease for a few quid a year, and they were trying to raise money to get the whole thing started again. The way Teddy was going on you'd think it was the biggest money spinner since they invented the mint, and he offered to cut me in so they could put in a winding engine and a cyanide plant. Well, I wasn't going to have any of that, mainly because anything Teddy was in just had to be a fizzer. I said it was alright to chuck his wife's money down a hole in the ground, but he wasn't going to chuck mine after it. That made him jump up and down a bit and he wanted to fight me; then he decided to go away and look up his law books so he could sue me for malfeasance, or whatever it was."

"That's what we like about you, Barney," said Tom Neerim, as he and chip carried the chest into the auction room, "Always a model of tact; it's no wonder he got shirty. But I knew him a bit too and he was as silly as a goanna in season. Every scheme he ever touched seemed to go wrong somehow." He shook his head thoughtfully and they went inside.

Barney would have said more but he saw Freddy appearing round the corner. The youth's face lit up at the sight of the two vehicles and the activity of the men as they were unloaded.

"G'day, Barn, g'day Don." He ran forward. "Hang on, Tom. I'll give you a hand to cart the stuff inside."

"Back off ! Back off, Freddy!" roared Barney, 'don't you touch anything, you'll break it." He had had a painful experience due to the young man's activities.

"I'm just goin' to give 'em a bit of a hand."

"They don't need a hand, just get out of the way, clear off!"

"Ya minjy old cow, why don't ya give me a job? What's wrong, Barn, why've you got me in the gun like this?"

"Gawd, you're a nasty old bugger at times," said Tom who was standing in the back of the tip truck handing down some rickety Thonet chairs. "Give the kid a go! These auctions of yours are getting bigger every week and if there's only two of you how can you get out to buy new stock. Give Freddy a job and he can watch the place while you're out."

"I'd sooner leave Jack the Ripper in charge of a brothel. Forget it, Freddy; there's no way I'd give you a job."

"He wouldn't know if his bum was on fire," said Freddy "I could be a real help round this place if only he'd give me a job. What's wrong with me; I could talk to the customers better than him, anyway.

"Yair, he's a miserable old bastard, Freddy, always was from a kid. He'll give you a job one of these days; but don't ever make the mistake of being polite to him, that brings out the worst side of his nature C'mon, you can give a hand to get the stuff off the trucks and you can come with us tomorrow and put in a couple'a days helping with the old house.

"What about the wall? demanded Barney I need you blokes here to move the lino and fix the hole," said Barney.

"Sorry, pal, can't do it till Wednesday. We have to get more stuff out of the house before it's knocked off, there's a lot of copper piping built into the place and has to come out. We'll be right for your job on Wednesday."

"Forget it. The wall can stay down until Thursday. I won't have you in there while the sale's on. Useless pair of drongos. No wonder the country's on the bone of its backside; no one works anymore, except me."

His complaints were ignored in the interest of arranging Mr Sturgess's late possessions to advantage on the auction platform. The new owners made sure they were in the best position which was about two thirds of the way through the auction when the crowd would be largest.

Barney was instructed to be at his most eloquent when the time came to offer their goods for sale and not knock them down quickly to his favourite dealers just because they were vendors lots.

Having got everything displayed as well as possible they arranged the chamber pots and jugs and a few ornaments of dubious value on top of their furniture. Then filled them with faded artificial flowers that may have been, at at some distant time, grave decorations, saved by Mr Sturgess.

## Chapter - 5

Barney attended the government auctions of the time where vehicles and non lethal equipment left over from the war were sold for the best price. Another blitz buggy came up for sale and he bought it, even though it was more shabby and more beat up than the one he had already.

It was towed to his premises because he couldn't start it. Neither could it be fitted inside under cover. It had to be left on the vacant block between the forge and a Chinese market garden

It should have been safe but he had underestimated the mechanical ability of the local youths. They noted that the truck had been left in the open for a few nights and decided to start it and perhaps have a joy ride.

One of them managed to start the engine of the vehicle about six o'clock on a Sunday morning. The silencer had been removed or fallen off at some time and the noise split the Sabbath calm, scattered it for miles in a roaring cascade of sound.

Blitz-buggies were sturdy vehicles and this one had been started in gear. It instantly took off, but out of control. It cannoned off an old car the local car-wrecker had also stored on the vacant block, tore through the fence of the Chinese market garden and demolished their fowl shed. This sudden onslaught had a catastrophic effect on the physical and mental well-

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

