Over the Sliprails

by

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The Shanty-Keeper's Wife

There were about a dozen of us jammed into the coach, on the box seat and hanging on to the roof and tailboard as best we could. We were shearers, bagmen, agents, a squatter, a cockatoo, the usual joker -- and one or two professional spielers, perhaps. We were tired and stiff and nearly frozen -- too cold to talk and too irritable to risk the inevitable argument which an interchange of ideas would have led up to. We had been looking forward for hours, it seemed, to the pub where we were to change horses. For the last hour or two all that our united efforts had been able to get out of the driver was a grunt to the effect that it was "'bout a couple o' miles." Then he said, or grunted, "'Tain't fur now," a couple of times, and refused to commit himself any further; he seemed grumpy about having committed himself that far.

He was one of those men who take everything in dead earnest; who regard any expression of ideas outside their own sphere of life as trivial, or, indeed, if addressed directly to them, as offensive; who, in fact, are darkly suspicious of anything in the shape of a joke or laugh on the part of an outsider in their own particular dust-hole. He seemed to be always thinking, and thinking a lot; when his hands were not both engaged, he would tilt his hat forward and scratch the base of his skull with his little finger, and let his jaw hang. But his intellectual powers were mostly concentrated on a doubtful swingle-tree, a misfitting collar, or that there bay or piebald (on the off or near side) with the sore shoulder.

Casual letters or papers, to be delivered on the road, were matters which troubled him vaguely, but constantly -- like the abstract ideas of his passengers.

The joker of our party was a humourist of the dry order, and had been slyly taking rises out of the driver for the last two or three stages. But the driver only brooded. He wasn't the one to tell you straight if you offended him, or if he fancied you offended him, and thus gain your respect, or prevent a misunderstanding which would result in life-long enmity. He might meet you in after years when you had forgotten all about your trespass -- if indeed you had ever been conscious of it -- and "stoush" you unexpectedly on the ear.

Also you might regard him as your friend, on occasion, and yet he would stand by and hear a perfect stranger tell you the most outrageous lies, to your hurt, and know that the stranger was telling lies, and never put you up to it. It would never enter his head to do so. It wouldn't be any affair of his -- only an abstract question.

It grew darker and colder. The rain came as if the frozen south were spitting at your face and neck and hands, and our feet grew as big as camel's, and went dead, and we might as well have stamped the footboards with wooden legs for all the feeling we got into ours. But they were more comfortable that way, for the toes didn't curl up and pain so much, nor did our corns stick out so hard against the leather, and shoot.

We looked out eagerly for some clearing, or fence, or light -- some sign of the shanty where we were to change horses -- but there was nothing save blackness all round. The long, straight, cleared road was no longer relieved by the ghostly patch of light, far ahead, where the bordering tree-walls came together in perspective and framed the ether. We were down in the bed of the bush.

We pictured a haven of rest with a suspended lamp burning in the frosty air outside and a big log fire in a cosy parlour off the bar, and a long table set for supper. But this is a land of contradictions; wayside shanties turn up unexpectedly and in the most unreasonable places, and are, as likely as not, prepared for a banquet when you are not hungry and can't wait, and as cold and dark as a bushman's grave when you are and can.

Suddenly the driver said: "We're there now." He said this as if he had driven us to the scaffold to be hanged, and was fiercely glad that he'd got us there safely at last. We looked but saw nothing; then a light appeared ahead and seemed to come towards us; and presently we saw that it was a lantern held up by a man in a slouch hat, with a dark bushy beard, and a three-bushel bag around his shoulders. He held up his other hand, and said something to the driver in a tone that might have been used by the leader of a search party who had just found the body. The driver stopped and then went on slowly.

"What's up?" we asked. "What's the trouble?"

"Oh, it's all right," said the driver.

"The publican's wife is sick," somebody said, "and he wants us to come quietly."

The usual little slab and bark shanty was suggested in the gloom, with a big bark stable looming in the background. We climbed down like so many cripples. As soon as we began to feel our legs and be sure we had the right ones and the proper allowance of feet, we helped, as quietly as possible, to take the horses out and round to the stable.

"Is she very bad?" we asked the publican, showing as much concern as we could.

"Yes," he said, in a subdued voice of a rough man who had spent several anxious, sleepless nights by the sick bed of a dear one. "But, God willing, I think we'll pull her through."

Thus encouraged we said, sympathetically: "We're very sorry to trouble you, but I suppose we could manage to get a drink and a bit to eat?"

"Well," he said, "there's nothing to eat in the house, and I've only got rum and milk. You can have that if you like."

One of the pilgrims broke out here.

"Well of all the pubs," he began, "that I've ever --"

"Hush-sh-sh!" said the publican.

The pilgrim scowled and retired to the rear. You can't express your feelings freely when there's a woman dying close handy.

"Well, who says rum and milk?" asked the joker, in a low voice.

"Wait here," said the publican, and disappeared into the little front passage.

Presently a light showed through a window, with a scratched and fly-bitten B and A on two panes, and a mutilated R on the third, which was broken. A door opened, and we sneaked into the bar. It was like having drinks after hours where the police are strict and independent.

When we came out the driver was scratching his head and looking at the harness on the verandah floor.

"You fellows 'll have ter put in the time for an hour or so. The horses is out back somewheres," and he indicated the interior of Australia with a side jerk of his head, "and the boy ain't back with 'em yet."

"But dash it all," said the Pilgrim, "me and my mate ----"

"Hush!" said the publican.

"How long are the horses likely to be?" we asked the driver.

"Dunno," he grunted. "Might be three or four hours. It's all accordin'."

"Now, look here," said the Pilgrim, "me and my mate wanter catch the train."

"Hush-sh-sh!" from the publican in a fierce whisper.

"Well, boss," said the joker, "can you let us have beds, then? I don't want to freeze here all night, anyway."

"Yes," said the landlord, "I can do that, but some of you will have to sleep double and some of you'll have to take it out of the sofas, and one or two 'll have to make a shakedown on the floor. There's plenty of bags in the stable, and you've got rugs and coats with you. Fix it up amongst yourselves."

"But look here!" interrupted the Pilgrim, desperately, "we can't afford to wait! We're only `battlers', me and my mate, pickin' up crumbs by the wayside. We've got to catch the ----"

"Hush!" said the publican, savagely. "You fool, didn't I tell you my missus was bad? I won't have any noise."

"But look here," protested the Pilgrim, "we must catch the train at Dead Camel ----"

"You'll catch my boot presently," said the publican, with a savage oath, "and go further than Dead Camel. I won't have my missus disturbed for you or any other man! Just you shut up or get out, and take your blooming mate with you."

We lost patience with the Pilgrim and sternly took him aside.

"Now, for God's sake, hold your jaw," we said. "Haven't you got any consideration at all? Can't you see the man's wife is ill -- dying perhaps -- and he nearly worried off his head?"

The Pilgrim and his mate were scraggy little bipeds of the city push variety, so they were suppressed.

"Well," yawned the joker, "I'm not going to roost on a stump all night. I'm going to turn in."

"It'll be eighteenpence each," hinted the landlord. "You can settle now if you like to save time."

We took the hint, and had another drink. I don't know how we "fixed it up amongst ourselves," but we got settled down somehow. There was a lot of mysterious whispering and scuffling round by the light of a couple of dirty greasy bits of candle. Fortunately we dared not speak loud enough to have a row, though most of us were by this time in the humour to pick a quarrel with a long-lost brother.

The Joker got the best bed, as good-humoured, good-natured chaps generally do, without seeming to try for it. The growler of the party got the floor and chaff bags, as selfish men mostly do -- without seeming to try for it either. I took it out of one of the "sofas", or rather that sofa took it out of me. It was short and narrow and down by the head, with a leaning to one corner on the outside, and had more nails and bits of gin-case than original sofa in it.

I had been asleep for three seconds, it seemed, when somebody shook me by the shoulder and said:

"Take yer seats."

When I got out, the driver was on the box, and the others were getting rum and milk inside themselves (and in bottles) before taking their seats.

It was colder and darker than before, and the South Pole seemed nearer, and pretty soon, but for the rum, we should have been in a worse fix than before.

There was a spell of grumbling. Presently someone said:

"I don't believe them horses was lost at all. I was round behind the stable before I went to bed, and seen horses there; and if they wasn't them same horses there, I'll eat 'em raw!"

"Would yer?" said the driver, in a disinterested tone.

"I would," said the passenger. Then, with a sudden ferocity, "and you too!"

The driver said nothing. It was an abstract question which didn't interest him.

We saw that we were on delicate ground, and changed the subject for a while. Then someone else said:

"I wonder where his missus was? I didn't see any signs of her about, or any other woman about the place, and we was pretty well all over it."

"Must have kept her in the stable," suggested the Joker.

"No, she wasn't, for Scotty and that chap on the roof was there after bags."

"She might have been in the loft," reflected the Joker.

"There was no loft," put in a voice from the top of the coach.

"I say, Mister -- Mister man," said the Joker suddenly to the driver, "Was his missus sick at all?"

"I dunno," replied the driver. "She might have been. He said so, anyway. I ain't got no call to call a man a liar."

"See here," said the cannibalistic individual to the driver, in the tone of a man who has made up his mind for a row, "has that shanty-keeper got a wife at all?"

"I believe he has."

"And is she living with him?"

"No, she ain't -- if yer wanter know."

"Then where is she?"

"I dunno. How am I to know? She left him three or four years ago. She was in Sydney last time I heard of her. It ain't no affair of mine, anyways."

"And is there any woman about the place at all, driver?" inquired a professional wanderer reflectively.

"No -- not that I knows on. There useter be a old black gin come pottering round sometimes, but I ain't seen her lately."

"And excuse me, driver, but is there anyone round there at all?" enquired the professional wanderer, with the air of a conscientious writer, collecting material for an Australian novel from life, with an eye to detail.

"Naw," said the driver -- and recollecting that he was expected to be civil and obliging to his employers' patrons, he added in surly apology, "Only the boss and the stableman, that I knows of." Then repenting of the apology, he asserted his manhood again, and asked, in a tone calculated to risk a breach of the peace, "Any more questions, gentlemen -- while the shop's open?"

There was a long pause.

"Driver," asked the Pilgrim appealingly, "was them horses lost at all?"

"I dunno," said the driver. "He said they was. He's got the looking after them. It was nothing to do with me."

. . . . .

"Twelve drinks at sixpence a drink" -- said the Joker, as if calculating to himself -- "that's six bob, and, say on an average, four shouts -- that's one pound four. Twelve beds at eighteenpence a bed -- that's eighteen shillings; and say ten bob in various drinks and the stuff we brought with us, that's two pound twelve. That publican didn't do so bad out of us in two hours."

We wondered how much the driver got out of it, but thought it best not to ask him.

. . . . .

We didn't say much for the rest of the journey. There was the usual man who thought as much and knew all about it from the first, but he wasn't appreciated. We suppressed him. One or two wanted to go back and "stoush" that landlord, and the driver stopped the coach cheerfully at their request; but they said they'd come across him again and allowed themselves to be persuaded out of it. It made us feel bad to think how we had allowed ourselves to be delayed, and robbed, and had sneaked round on tiptoe, and how we had sat on the inoffensive Pilgrim and his mate, and all on account of a sick wife who didn't exist.

The coach arrived at Dead Camel in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and distrust, and we spread ourselves over the train and departed.

A Gentleman Sharper and Steelman Sharper

Steelman and Smith had been staying at the hotel for several days in the dress and character of bushies down for what they considered a spree. The gentleman sharper from the Other Side had been hanging round them for three days now. Steelman was the more sociable, and, to all appearances, the greener of the two bush mates; but seemed rather too much under the influence of Smith, who was reserved, suspicious, self-contained, or sulky. He almost scowled at Gentleman Sharper's "Good-morning!" and "Fine day!", replied in monosyllables and turned half away with an uneasy, sullen, resentful hump of his shoulder and shuffle of his feet.

Steelman took Smith for a stroll on the round, bald tussock hills surrounding the city, and rehearsed him for the last act until after sundown.

Gentleman Sharper was lounging, with a cigar, on the end of the balcony, where he had been contentedly contemplating the beautiful death of day. His calm, classic features began to whiten (and sharpen) in the frosty moonlight.

Steelman and Smith sat on deck-chairs behind a half-screen of ferns on the other end of the balcony, smoked their after-dinner smoke, and talked in subdued tones as befitted the time and the scene -- great, softened, misty hills in a semicircle, and the water and harbour lights in moonlight.

The other boarders were loitering over dinner, in their rooms, or gone out; the three were alone on the balcony, which was a rear one.

Gentleman Sharper moved his position, carelessly, noiselessly, yet quickly, until he leaned on the rail close to the ferns and could overhear every word the bushies said. He had dropped his cigar overboard, and his scented handkerchief behind a fern-pot en route.

"But he looks all right, and acts all right, and talks all right -- and shouts all right," protested Steelman. "He's not stumped, for I saw twenty or thirty sovereigns when he shouted; and he doesn't seem to care a damn whether we stand in with him or not."

"There you are! That's just where it is!" said Smith, with some logic, but in a tone a wife uses in argument (which tone, by the way, especially if backed by logic or common sense, makes a man wild sooner than anything else in this world of troubles).

Steelman jerked his chair half-round in disgust. "That's you!" he snorted, "always suspicious! Always suspicious of everybody and everything! If I found myself shot into a world where I couldn't trust anybody I'd shoot myself out of it. Life would be worse than not worth living. Smith, you'll never make money, except by hard graft -- hard, bullocking, nigger-driving graft like we had on that damned railway section for the last six months, up to our knees in water all winter, and all for a paltry cheque of one-fifty -- twenty of that gone already. How do you expect to make money in this country if you

won't take anything for granted, except hard cash? I tell you, Smith, there's a thousand pounds lost for every one gained or saved by trusting too little. How did Vanderbilt and ----"

Steelman elaborated to a climax, slipping a glance warily, once or twice, out of the tail of his eye through the ferns, low down.

"There never was a fortune made that wasn't made by chancing it."

He nudged Smith to come to the point. Presently Smith asked, sulkily:

"Well, what was he saying?"

"I thought I told you! He says he's behind the scenes in this gold boom, and, if he had a hundred pounds ready cash to-morrow, he'd make three of it before Saturday. He said he could put one-fifty to one-fifty."

"And isn't he worth three hundred?"

"Didn't I tell you," demanded Steelman, with an impatient ring, and speaking rapidly, "that he lost his mail in the wreck of the `Tasman'? You know she went down the day before yesterday, and the divers haven't got at the mails yet."

"Yes. . . . But why doesn't he wire to Sydney for some stuff?"

"I'm ----! Well, I suppose I'll have to have patience with a born natural. Look here, Smith, the fact of the matter is that he's a sort of black-sheep -- sent out on the remittance system, if the truth is known, and with letters of introduction to some big-bugs out here -- that explains how he gets to know these wire-pullers behind the boom. His people have probably got the quarterly allowance business fixed hard and tight with a bank or a lawyer in Sydney; and there'll have to be enquiries about the lost `draft' (as he calls a cheque) and a letter or maybe a cable home to England; and it might take weeks."

"Yes," said Smith, hesitatingly. "That all sounds right enough. But" -- with an inspiration -- "why don't he go to one of these big-bug boomsters he knows -- that he got letters of introduction to -- and get him to fix him up?"

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Steelman, hopelessly. "Listen to him! Can't you see that they're the last men he wants to let into his game? Why, he wants to use THEM! They're the mugs as far as he is concerned!"

"Oh -- I see!" said Smith, after hesitating, and rather slowly -- as if he hadn't quite finished seeing yet.

Steelman glanced furtively at the fern-screen, and nudged Smith again.