

**Module A: Distinctively Visual**

**Henry Lawson**

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## Lawson, Henry (1867–1922)

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Henry Lawson (1867-1922), short story writer and balladist, was born on 17 June 1867 at Grenfell, New South Wales, eldest of four surviving children of Niels Hertzberg (Peter) Larsen, Norwegian-born miner, and his wife [Louisa](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lawson-louisa-7121), née Albury. Larsen went to sea at 21 and, after many voyages, arrived in Melbourne in 1855 where he jumped ship and joined the gold rush. He and Louisa were married in 1866 and Henry (the surname changed when the parents registered the birth) was born about a year later, by which time the marriage was already showing some signs of stress. The family moved often as Peter followed the gold but, in August 1873 with the birth of their third child imminent, they finally settled back at Pipeclay where they had started from. Peter took up a selection which Louisa managed; she also ran a post office in his name while he worked as a building contractor around Mudgee.

Existence for the Lawsons, however, remained precarious. The selection even at its best was only marginally productive. With Peter often absent, Louisa was lonely and vulnerable: responsibility began to fall on Henry's young and rather frail shoulders and intensified in him a tendency to reclusiveness and introversion and a personal conviction that he was somehow different from others in a way that cut him off from them. There were happy times: Louisa was imaginative and a brilliant raconteuse and Peter was an accomplished musician. But failing communication between husband and wife, Peter's increasingly frequent absences and the exacerbating effect of continual hardship seemed to outweigh such lighter moments. The young Lawson was often alone, often worried about the problems of the selection, and much disturbed by the apparent estrangement of his parents, a situation about which he was more knowledgeable than the younger children and which caused him keener suffering. Outside the family, he was one of those children who seem inevitably to become the butt for juvenile ridicule and cruelty. He had little opportunity for boyhood friendship and little talent for it when rare opportunities arose. He several times expressed to his father a reluctance to grow older even as worry, fears and oppression were denying him most of the joys of childhood.

Lawson was 8 before Louisa's vigorous agitation led to a school being established in the district, and he was 9 before he actually entered the slab-and-bark Eurunderee Public School as a pupil in the care of the new teacher John Tierney. In the same year, 1876, after a night of sickness and earache, he awoke one morning slightly deaf. For the next five years he suffered hearing deficiency. When he was 14 the condition deteriorated radically and he was left with a major and incurable hearing loss. For Lawson, already psychologically isolated, the deeper silence of partial deafness was a crushing blow.

When his much-interrupted schooling (three years all told) ended in 1880, Lawson worked with his father on local contract building jobs and then further afield in the Blue Mountains. In 1883, however, he joined his mother in Sydney at her request. Louisa had abandoned the selection and was living at Phillip Street with Henry's sister Gertrude and his brother Peter. He became apprenticed to Hudson Bros Ltd as a coachpainter and undertook night-class study towards matriculation. Yet, as the story ('Arvie Aspinall's Alarm Clock') which he based on that time of his life suggests, he was no happier in Sydney than he had been on the selection. His daily routine exhausted him, his workmates persecuted him and he failed the examinations. Over the next few years he tried or applied for various jobs with little success. Oppressed anew by his deafness, he went to Melbourne in 1887 in order to be treated at the Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital. The visit, happy in other ways, produced no cure for his affliction and thereafter Lawson seems to have resigned himself to living in the muffled and frustrating world of the deaf.

Meanwhile he had begun to write. Contact with his mother's radical friends imbued in him a fiery and ardent republicanism out of which grew his first published poem, 'A Song of the Republic' (*Bulletin*, 1 October 1887). He followed this with 'The Wreck of the Derry Castle' and 'Golden Gully', the latter growing partly out of memories of the diggings of his boyhood. At the same time he had his introduction to journalism, writing pieces for the *Republican*, a truculent little paper run by Louisa and William Keep (its precarious and eccentric existence is celebrated in the poem 'The Cambaroora Star'). By 1890 Lawson had achieved some reputation as a writer of verse, poems such as 'Faces in the Street', 'Andy's Gone With Cattle' and 'The Watch on the Kerb' being some of the more notable of that period.

Early in 1891 Lawson was offered, as he put it, 'the first, the last and the only chance I got in journalism'. The offer came from [Gresley Lukin](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lukin-gresley-4046%22%20%5Co%20%22Lukin%2C%20Gresley%20%281840%20-%201916%29) of the Brisbane *Boomerang* and was eagerly accepted. Lawson became a prolific contributor of prose and rhymes to the *Boomerang* and also to [William Lane](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lane-william-7024)'s *Worker*. But his luck had not changed: by September the *Boomerang* was in trouble and Lawson's services were dispensed with. Once again he found himself in Sydney dividing his time between odd jobs, writing and occasional carousing with friends, chief among whom at this time was [E. J. Brady](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brady-edwin-james-5335).

Whether it was a matter of luck or temperament, Lawson seemed unable to attain equilibrium or direction in his writing or his lifestyle. His promising early poems had been followed by a rush of versifying on a wide range of topics, contemporary and reminiscent; and his first published story, 'His Father's Mate' (*Bulletin*, December 1888), though uneven and sentimental, had given glimpses of his extraordinary ability as a writer of short stories. By 1892 a number of sketches together with the magnificent 'The Drover's Wife' had fully borne out the initial promise. Yet Lawson seemed in a rut: failing to concentrate his energies and gifts much beyond what was required for subsistence, spending more and more time in favourite bars around Sydney. Recognizing something of Lawson's inner faltering, [J. F. Archibald](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/archibald-jules-francois-2896) suggested he take a trip inland at the *Bulletin*'s expense. With £5 and a rail ticket to Bourke, he set out in September 1892 on what was to be one of the most important journeys of his life.

Much of what Lawson saw in the drought-blasted west of New South Wales during succeeding months appalled him. 'You can have no idea of the horrors of the country out here', he wrote to his aunt, 'men tramp and beg and live like dogs'. Nevertheless, the experience at Bourke itself and in surrounding districts through which he carried his swag absolutely overwhelmed him. By the time he returned to civilization, he was armed with memories and experiences—some of them comic but many shattering—that would furnish his writing for years. 'The Bush Undertaker', 'The Union Buries its Dead' and some of the finest of the Mitchell sketches were among the work he produced soon after his return. *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, the selection of his work produced by Louisa on the *Dawn* press in 1894, brought together some of these stories albeit in unprepossessing form and flawed by misprints. But *While the Billy Boils* (1896) was Lawson's first major short-story collection. It remains one of the great classics of Australian literature.

Though the creative pressure of his outback experience showed almost immediately in his writing, Lawson's life in other respects settled back into the depressingly familiar hole-and-corner existence. After six months he went to New Zealand where he worked eventually as a telegraph linesman, turning his back on journalism and alcohol. He returned to Sydney on 29 July 1894 to take a position on the newly formed *Daily Worker* only to see it wound up three days later. He consoled himself with drink and Bohemian exploits with a circle of friends that now included [J. Le Gay Brereton](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brereton-john-le-gay-5351). The release in December of *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, did little to lift his spirits or his income.

Within a year, however, Lawson seemed poised to achieve both the recognition and the stability he had been seeking. In 1895 he contracted to publish two books with [Angus](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/angus-david-mackenzie-5030) & [Robertson](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/robertson-george-8233); and he met Bertha Marie Louise Bredt (1876-1957), daughter of [Bertha McNamara](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcnamara-matilda-emilie-bertha-7431). After a brief and, on Lawson's part, characteristically intense and impulsive courtship, they were married on 15 April 1896. That year Angus and Robertson brought out the two books, *In the Days when the World was Wide and other Verses* and *While the Billy Boils*, as arranged; both were well received.

Following an abortive trip to Western Australia in search of gold, the Lawsons returned to Sydney where Henry, now a writer and public figure of some note, embarked on a colourful round of escapades in which large amounts of alcohol and the company of his Dawn and Dusk Club friends, including [Fred Broomfield](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/broomfield-frederick-john-fred-5381), [Victor Daley](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/daley-victor-james-william-patrick-5867) and [Bertram Stevens](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stevens-bertram-william-mathyson-francis-8651), were central ingredients. The Lawsons' move to Mangamaunu in the South Island of New Zealand was arranged by Bertha with the express intention of removing him from this kind of life. They left on 31 March 1897, but the venture was not a success, creatively or otherwise. Lawson's initial enthusiasm for the Maoris whom he taught at the lonely, primitive settlement soon waned. As well, there is evidence in some of his verse of that time ('Written Afterwards', 'The Jolly Dead March') that he was realizing, for perhaps the first time since their romantically rushed courtship and marriage and subsequent boisterous, crowded life in Western Australia and Sydney, both the responsibilities and the ties of his situation. Lawson's growing restiveness was deepened by promising letters from English publishers. Bertha's pregnancy strengthened his resolve and they left Mangamaunu in November 1897, returning to Sydney in March after Bertha's confinement. Lawson spent the enforced wait in Wellington writing a play ('Pinter's Son Jim') commissioned by[Bland Holt](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/holt-joseph-thomas-bland-3785); it turned out to be too unwieldy to stage.

Lawson went back to old friends and old ways in Sydney. He had returned with one overriding aim: to get to London, where he felt certain there would be more opportunity for him to live by his pen. He expressed a mounting sense of frustration and bitterness by drinking heavily—he entered a home for inebriates in November 1898—and by writing a personal statement to the*Bulletin*. This appeared in the January 1899 issue under the title 'Pursuing Literature in Australia'. Abstemious and industrious throughout the ensuing year, Lawson worked on books contracted earlier with Angus & Robertson—*On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails* (stories) and*Verses Popular and Humorous*. But he would probably not have realized his goal of 'seeking London' had it not been for the generous help of [David Scott Mitchell](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mitchell-david-scott-4210), the governor [Earl Beauchamp](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/beauchamp-seventh-earl-5174) and George Robertson. He set off on 20 April 1900 for England. With him went his wife, his son Joseph and his daughter of just over two months, Bertha.

Lawson himself in later years provided fuel for the idea that his English interlude, so eagerly anticipated, was in fact a catastrophe: 'Days in London like a nightmare'; 'That wild run to London/That wrecked and ruined me'. But he had some successes in London, the opportunity was certainly there for him to establish himself upon the literary scene and he may have been in some ways simply unlucky. On arrival he retained the services of J. B. Pinker, one of the best literary agents in England, and was soon receiving enthusiastic encouragement from critic and publisher's reader Edward Garnett and William Blackwood, editor of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The four Joe Wilson stories—generally regarded by critics as the peak of his achievement—were written in London, and Blackwood published two new Lawson collections in two years: *Joe Wilson and his Mates* (1901) and *Children of the Bush* (1902). But the strain of family life in unfamiliar surrounds and an unkind climate, his wife's serious illness (she spent three months from May 1901 in Bethlem Royal Hospital as a mental patient) and the consequent return to the soul-destroying task of writing under pressure to pay the bills, all sapped Lawson's early resilience and affected his health, the quality of his work and the nature of his literary aspirations and plans. By April 1902 he was arranging for Bertha to return home with the children. He followed soon after and they were all back in Sydney before the end of July.

From that time Lawson's personal and creative life entered upon a ghastly decline. A reconciliation with Bertha soon after their return was short lived. In December 1902 he attempted suicide. In April next year Bertha sought and obtained a decree for judicial separation. He wrote a great deal despite his often squalid circumstances but his work alternated between desperate revivals of old themes and inspirations and equally desperate and unsuccessful attempts to break new ground. Maudlin sentimentality and melodrama, often incipient even in some earlier work, invaded both his prose and poetry. Among later books were *The Skyline Riders and other Verses* (1910); *My Army, o my Army! and other Songs* (1915); and *Triangles of Life and other stories* (1913). He was frequently gaoled for failure to pay maintenance for his children and, after 1907, was several times in a mental hospital. Though cared for by the loyal Mrs Byers, he became a frail, haunted and pathetic figure well known on the streets of Sydney; in his writing, images of ghostliness proliferated and increasingly a sense of insubstantiality blurred action and characters. Loyal friends arranged spells at Mallacoota, Victoria, (with Brady) in 1910 and at Leeton in 1916. But his state of mind, physical condition and alcoholism continued to worsen. The Commonwealth Literary Fund granted him £1 a week pension from May 1920. He died of cerebral haemorrhage at Abbotsford on 2 September 1922.

Lawson was something of a legendary figure in his lifetime. Not surprisingly, as dignitaries and others gathered for his state funeral on 4 September, that legend was already beginning to flourish in various exotic ways. The result was that some of his achievements were inflated—he became known, for example, as a great poet—and others obscured. Lawson's reputation must rest on his stories and on a relatively small group of them: *While the Billy Boils*, the Joe Wilson quartet of linked, longer stories and certain others lying outside these (among them, 'The Loaded Dog', 'Telling Mrs Baker' and 'The Geological Spieler'). In these he shows himself not only a master of short fiction but also a writer of peculiarly modern tendency. The prose is spare, cut to the bone, the plot is either slight or non-existent. Skilfully modulated reticence makes even the barest and shortest sketches seem excitingly full of possibility, alive with options and potential insights. A stunning example is 'On the Edge of a Plain' but almost any Mitchell sketch from*While the Billy Boils* exemplifies these qualities. Though not a symbolist writer, Lawson had the capacity to endow accurately observed documentary detail with a significance beyond its physical reality: the drover's wife burning the snake; the black goanna dying 'in violent convulsions on the ground' ('The Bush Undertaker'); the 'hard dry Darling River clods' clattering on to the coffin of the unknown drover ('The Union Buries its Dead') are seemingly artless yet powerful Lawsonian moments which, in context, transform simple surface realism into intimations about the mysteries, the desperations and the tragedies of ordinary and anonymous lives.

Lawson failed fully to assimilate one of the most vital inspirations of his writing life—his experience in the western outback. It was the source of most of his best work, but he returned to it again and again, coming close to Hemingway-like self-parody as he sought to gain creative renewal from a seam already thoroughly mined. Only the Joe Wilson series allowed him temporary freedom from this enslavement, because these four connected stories are about the rare joys, awkward intimacies and frequent sorrows of a marriage that is slowly, imperceptibly, deteriorating. As a subject it clearly owed much to those lonely months at Mangamaunu and it did not rejuvenate Lawson's art because he could not pursue the theme without coming into unacceptably close engagement with the realities of his own marriage. In any case, Lawson's withholding, austere prose was ill suited to analytic probing, which is why *Joe Wilson*, fine piece of work though it is, seems constantly on the point of disintegration.

The decline of his creative ability, as it were before his very eyes, in the years from about 1902 onwards (though the malaise is traceable earlier than that in, for example, *On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails*) was one of the great tragedies of Lawson's troubled life. Too much evidence exists to show with what deep and continued seriousness he aspired to be a memorable writer for his artistic decline to be regarded in any less important light. To this disaster were added personal crosses—deafness, a marital failure that deeply grieved him—which even a stronger temperament would have found hard to withstand. That he managed to dredge out of disadvantage, adversity and often appalling hardship so many magnificent stories is testimony to a toughness and determination that he is perhaps not often enough given credit for.

His statue by [George Lambert](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lambert-george-washington-thomas-7014) is in the Domain, Sydney; his portrait by [Longstaff](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/longstaff-william-frederick-will-7231%22%20%5Co%20%22Longstaff%2C%20William%20Frederick%20%281879%20-%201953%29) is in the Art Gallery of New South Wales and another by [Norman Carter](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/carter-norman-st-clair-5525) is at Parliament House, Canberra.

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lawson-henry-7118>

**The Drover’s Wife**

The two-roomed house is built of round timber, slabs, and stringy-bark, and floored with split slabs. A big bark kitchen standing at one end is larger than the house itself, veranda included.

Bush all around – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple-trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilisation – a shanty on the main road.

The drover, an ex-squatter, is away with sheep. His wife and children are left here alone.

Four ragged, dried-up-looking children are playing about the house. Suddenly one of them yells: “Snake! Mother, here’s a snake!”

The gaunt, sun-browned bushwoman dashes from the kitchen, snatches her baby from the ground, holds it on her left hip, and reaches for a stick.

“Where is it?”

“Here! Gone in the wood-heap;” yells the eldest boy – a sharp-faced urchin of eleven. “Stop there, mother! I’ll have him. Stand back! I’ll have the beggar!”

“Tommy, come here, or you’ll be bit. Come here at once when I tell you, you little wretch!”

The youngster comes reluctantly, carrying a stick bigger than himself. Then he yells, triumphantly:

“There it goes – under the house!” and darts away with club uplifted. At the same time the big, black, yellow-eyed dog-of-all-breeds, who has shown the wildest interest in the proceedings, breaks his chain and rushes after that snake. He is a moment late, however, and his nose reaches the crack in the slabs just as the end of its tail disappears. Almost at the same moment the boy’s club comes down and skins the aforesaid nose. Alligator takes small notice of this, and proceeds to undermine the building; but he is subdued after a struggle and chained up. They cannot afford to lose him.

The drover’s wife makes the children stand together near the dog-house while she watches for the snake. She gets two small dishes of milk and sets them down near the wall to tempt it to come out; but an hour goes by and it does not show itself.

It is near sunset, and a thunderstorm is coming. The children must be brought inside. She will not take them into the house, for she knows the snake is there, and may at any moment come up through a crack in the rough slab floor; so she carries several armfuls of firewood into the kitchen, and then takes the children there. The kitchen has no floor – or, rather, an earthen one – called a “ground floor” in this part of the bush. There is a large, roughly-made table in the centre of the place. She brings the children in, and makes them get on this table. They are two boys and two girls – mere babies. She gives some supper, and then, before it gets dark, she goes into house, and snatches up some pillows and bedclothes – expecting to see or lay or hand on the snake any minute. She makes a bed on the kitchen table for the children, and sits down beside it to watch all night.

She has an eye on the corner, and a green sapling club laid in readiness on the dresser by her side; also her sewing basket and a copy of the Young Ladies’ Journal. She has brought the dog into the room.

Tommy turns in, under protest, but says he’ll lie awake all night and smash that blinded snake.

His mother asks him how many times she has told not to swear.

He has his club with him under the bedclothes, and Jacky protests:

“Mummy! Tommy’s skinnin’ me alive wif his club. Make him take it out.”

Tommy: “Shet up you little – ! D’yer want to be bit with the snake?”

Jacky shuts up.

“If yer bit,” says Tommy, after a pause, “you’ll swell up, an smell, an’ turn red an’ green an’ blue all over till yer bust. Won’t he mother?”

“Now then, don’t frighten the child. Go to sleep,” she says.

The two younger children go to sleep, and now and then Jacky complains of being “skeezed.” More room is made for him. Presently Tommy says: “Mother! Listen to them (adjective) little possums. I’d like to screw their blanky necks.”

And Jacky protests drowsily.

“But they don’t hurt us, the little blanks!”

Mother: “There, I told you you’d teach Jacky to swear.” But the remark makes her smile. Jacky goes to sleep.

Presently Tommy asks:

“Mother! Do you think they’ll ever extricate the (adjective) kangaroo?”

“Lord! How am I to know, child? Go to sleep.”

“Will you wake me if the snake comes out?”

“Yes. Go to sleep.”

Near midnight. The children are all asleep and she sits there still, sewing and reading by turns. From time to time she glances round the floor and wall-plate, and, whenever she hears a noise, she reaches for the stick. The thunderstorm comes on, and the wind, rushing through the cracks in the slab wall, threatens to blow out her candle. She places it on a sheltered part of the dresser and fixes up a newspaper to protect it. At every flash of lightning, the cracks between the slabs gleam like polished silver. The thunder rolls, and the rain comes down in torrents.

Alligator lies at full length on the floor, with his eyes turned towards the partition. She knows by this that the snake is there. There are large cracks in that wall opening under the floor of the dwelling-house.

She is not a coward, but recent events have shaken her nerves. A little son of her brother-in-law was lately bitten by a snake, and died. Besides, she has not heard from her husband for six months, and is anxious about him.

He was a drover, and started squatting here when they were married. The drought of 18–– ruined him. He had to sacrifice the remnant of his flock and go droving again. He intends to move his family into the nearest town when he comes back, and, in the meantime, his brother, who keeps a shanty on the main road, comes over about once a month with provisions. The wife has still a couple of cows, one horse, and a few sheep. The brother-in-law kills one of the latter occasionally, gives her what she needs of it, and takes the rest in return for other provisions.

She is used to being left alone. She once lived like this for eighteen months. As a girl she built the usual castles in the air; but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead. She finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the Young Ladies’ Journal, and Heaven help her! Takes a pleasure in the fashion plates.

Her husband is an Australian, and so is she. He is careless, but a good enough husband. If he had the means he would take her to the city and keep her there like a princess. They are used to being apart, or at least she is. “No use fretting,” she says. He may forget sometimes that he is married; but if he has a good cheque when he comes back he will give most of it to her. When he had money he took her to the city several times – hired a railway sleeping compartment, and put up at the best hotels. He also bought her a buggy, but they had to sacrifice that along with the rest.

The last two children were born in the bush – one while her husband was bringing a drunken doctor, by force, to attend to her. She was alone on this occasion, and very weak. She had been ill with fever. She prayed to God to send her assistance. God sent Black Mary – the “whitest” gin in all the land. Or, at least, God sent King Jimmy first, and he sent Black Mary. He put his black face round the door post, took in the situation at a glance, and said cheerfully: “All right, missus – I bring my old woman, she down alonga creek.”

One of the children died while she was here alone. She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child.

It must be near one or two o’clock. The fire is burning low. Alligator lies with his head resting on his paws, and watches the wall. He is not a very beautiful dog, and the light shows numerous old wounds where the hair will not grow. He is afraid of nothing on the face of the earth or under it. He will tackle a bullock as readily as he will tackle a flea. He hates all other dogs – except kangaroo-dogs  – and has a marked dislike to friends or relations of the family. They seldom call, however. He sometimes makes friends with strangers. He hates snakes and has killed many, but he will be bitten some day and die; most snake-dogs end that way.

Now and then the bushwoman lays down her work and watches, and listens, and thinks. She thinks of things in her own life, for there is little else to think about.

The rain will make the grass grow, and this reminds her how she fought a bush-fire once while her husband was away. The grass was long, and very dry, and the fire threatened to burn her out. She put on an old pair of her husband’s trousers and beat out the flames with a green bough, till great drops of sooty perspiration stood out on her forehead and ran in streaks down her blackened arms. The sight of his mother in trousers greatly amused Tommy, who worked like a little hero by her side, but the terrified baby howled lustily for his “mummy.” The fire would have mastered her but for four excited bushmen who arrived in the nick of time. It was a mixed-up affair all round; when she went to take up the baby he screamed and struggled convulsively, thinking it was a “blackman;” and Alligator, trusting more to the child’s sense than his own instinct, charged furiously, and (being old and slightly deaf) did not in his excitement at first recognise his mistress's voice, but continued to hang on to the moleskins until choked off by Tommy with a saddle-strap. The dog’s sorrow for his blunder, and his anxiety to let it be known that it was all a mistake, was as evident as his ragged tail and a twelve-inch grin could make it. It was a glorious time for the boys; a day to look back to, and talk about, and laugh over for many years.

She thinks how she fought a flood during her husband’s absence. She stood for hours in the drenching downpour, and dug an overflow gutter to save the dam across the creek. But she could not save it. There are things that a bushwoman cannot do. Next morning the dam was broken, and her heart was nearly broken too, for she thought how her husband would feel when he came home and saw the result of years of labour swept away. She cried then.

She also fought the pleuro-pneumonia – dosed and bled the few remaining cattle, and wept again when her two best cows died.

Again, she fought a mad bullock that besieged the house for a day. She made bullets and fired at him through cracks in the slabs with an old shot-gun. He was dead in the morning. She skinned him and got seventeen-and-sixpence for the hide.

She also fights the crows and eagles that have designs on her chickens. Her plan of campaign is very original. The children cry “Crows, mother!” and she rushes out and aims a broomstick at the birds as though it were a gun, and says “Bung!” The crows leave in a hurry; they are cunning, but a woman’s cunning is greater.

Occasionally a bushman in the horrors, or a villainous-looking sundowner, comes and nearly scares the life out of her. She generally tells the suspicious-looking stranger that her husband and two sons are at work below the dam, or over at the yard, for he always cunningly inquires for the boss.

Only last week a gallows-faced swagman – having satisfied himself that there were no men on the place – threw his swag down on the veranda, and demanded tucker. She gave him something to eat; then he expressed the intention of staying for the night. It was sundown then. She got a batten from the sofa, loosened the dog, and confronted the stranger, holding the batten in one hand and the dog’s collar with the other. “Now you go!” she said. He looked at her and at the dog, said “All right, mum,” in a cringing tone and left. She was a determined-looking woman, and Alligator’s yellow eyes glared unpleasantly –  besides, the dog’s chawing-up apparatus greatly resembled that of the reptile he was named after.

She has few pleasures to think of as she sits here alone by the fire, on guard against a snake. All days are much the same for her; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. There is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet. You might walk for twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind, unless you are a bushman. This is because of the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees – that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ship can sail – and farther.

But this bushwoman is used to the loneliness of it. As a girl-wife she hated it, but now she would feel strange away from it.

She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children.

She seems contented with her lot. She loves her children, but has no time to show it. She seems harsh to them. Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the “womanly” or sentimental side of nature.

It must be nearing morning now; but the clock is in the dwelling-house. Her candle is nearly done; she forgot that she was out of candles. Some more wood must be got to keep the fire up, and so she shuts the dog inside and hurries around to the woodheap. The rain has cleared off. She seizes a stick, pulls it out, and – crash! The whole pile collapses.

Yesterday she bargained with a stray blackfellow to bring her some wood, and while he was at work she went in search of a missing cow. She was absent an hour or so, and the native black made good use of his time. On her return she was so astonished to see a good heap of wood by the chimney, and she gave him an extra fig of tobacco, and praised him for not being lazy. He thanked her, and left with head erect and chest well out. He was the last of his tribe and a King; but he had built that wood-heap hollow.

She is hurt now, and tears spring to her eyes as she sits down again by the table. She takes up a handkerchief to wipe the tears away, but pokes her eyes with her bare fingers instead. The handkerchief is full of holes, and she finds that she has put here thumb through one, and her forefinger through another.

This makes her laugh, to the surprise of the dog. She has a keen, very keen, sense of the ridiculous; and some time or other she will amuse bushmen with the story.

She has been amused before like that. One day she sat down “to have a good cry,” as she said – and the old cat rubbed against her dress and “cried too.” Then she had to laugh.

It must be near daylight now. The room is very close and hot because of the fire. Alligator still watches the wall from time to time. Suddenly he becomes greatly interested; he draws himself a few inches nearer the partition, and a thrill runs though his body. The hair on the back of neck begins to bristle, and the battle-light is in his yellow eyes. She knows what this means, and lays her hand on the stick. The lower end of one of the partition slabs has a large crack on both sides. An evil pair of small, bright bead-like eyes glisten at one of these holes. The snake – a black one – comes slowly out, about a foot, and moves its head up and down. The dog lies still, and the woman sits as one fascinated. The snake comes out a foot further. She lifts her stick, and the reptile, as though suddenly aware of danger, sticks his head in through the crack on the other side of the slab, and hurries to get his tail round after him. Alligator springs, and his jaws come together with a snap. He misses, for his nose is large, and the snake’s body close down on the angle formed by the slabs and the floor. He snaps again as the tail comes round. He has the snake now, and tugs it out eighteen inches. Thud, thud. Alligator gives another pull and he has the snake out – a black brute, five feet long. The head rises to dart about, but the dog has the enemy close to the neck. He is a big, heavy dog, but quick as a terrier. He shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind. The eldest boy wakes up, seizes his stick, and tries to get out of bed, but his mother forces him back with a grip of iron. Thud, thud – the snake’s back is broken in several places. Thud, thud – it’s head is crushed, and Alligator’s nose skinned again.

She lifts the mangled reptile on the point of her stick, carries it to the fire, and throws it in; then piles on the wood and watches the snake burn. The boy and the dog watch too. She lays her hand on the dog’s head, and all the fierce, angry light dies out of his yellow eyes. The younger children are quieted, and presently go to sleep. The dirty-legged boy stands for a moment in his shirt, watching the fire. Presently he looks up at her, sees the tears in her eyes, and, throwing his arms around her neck exclaims:

“Mother, I won’t never go drovin’ blarst me if I do!”

And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over bush.

**The Bush Undertaker**

"Five Bob!"

The old man shaded his eyes and peered through the dazzling glow of that broiling Christmas Day. He stood just within the door of a slab-and-bark hut situated upon the bank of a barren creek; sheep-yards lay to the right, and a low line of bare, brown ridges formed a suitable background to the scene.

"Five Bob!" shouted he again; and a dusty sheep-dog rose wearily from the shaded side of the but and looked inquiringly at his master, who pointed towards some sheep which were straggling from the flock.

"Fetch 'em back," he said confidently.

The dog went off, and his master returned to the interior of the hut.

"We'll yard 'em early," he said to himself; "the super won't know. We'll yard 'em early, and have the arternoon to ourselves."

"We'll get dinner," he added, glancing at some pots on the fire. "I cud do a bit of doughboy, an' that theer boggabri'll eat like tater-marrer along of the salt meat." He moved one of the black buckets from the blaze. "I likes to keep it jist on the sizzle," he said in explanation to himself; "hard bilin' makes it tough--I'll keep it jist a-simmerin'."

Here his soliloquy was interrupted by the return of the dog.

"All right, Five Bob," said the hatter, "dinner'll be ready dreckly. Jist keep yer eye on the sheep till I calls yer; keep 'em well rounded up, an' we'll yard 'em afterwards and have a holiday."

This speech was accompanied by a gesture evidently intelligible, for the dog retired as though he understood English, and the cooking proceeded.

"I'll take a pick an' shovel with me an' root up that old blackfellow," mused the shepherd, evidently following up a recent train of thought; "I reckon it'll do now. I'll put in the spuds."

The last sentence referred to the cooking, the first to a blackfellow's grave about which he was curious.

"The sheep's a-campin'," said the soliloquizer, glancing through the door. "So me an' Five Bob'll be able to get our dinner in peace. I wish I had just enough fat to make the pan siss; I'd treat myself to a leather-jacket; but it took three weeks' skimmin' to get enough for them theer doughboys."

In due time the dinner was dished up; and the old man seated himself on a block, with the lid of a gin-case across his knees for a table. Five Bob squatted opposite with the liveliest interest and appreciation depicted on his intelligent countenance.

Dinner proceeded very quietly, except when the carver paused to ask the dog how some tasty morsel went with him, and Five Bob's tail declared that it went very well indeed.

"Here y'are, try this," cried the old man, tossing him a large piece of doughboy. A click of Five Bob's jaws and the dough was gone.

"Clean into his liver!" said the old man with a faint smile. He washed up the tinware in the water the duff had been boiled in, and then, with the assistance of the dog, yarded the sheep.

This accomplished, he took a pick and shovel and an old sack, and started out over the ridge, followed, of course, by his four-legged mate. After tramping some three miles he reached a spur, running out from the main ridge. At the extreme end of this, under some gum-trees, was a little mound of earth, barely defined in the grass, and indented in the centre as all blackfellows' graves were.

He set to work to dig it up, and sure enough, in about half an hour he bottomed on payable dirt.

When he had raked up all the bones, he amused himself by putting them together on the grass and by speculating as to whether they had belonged to black or white, male or female. Failing, however, to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, he dusted them with great care, put them in the bag, and started for home.

He took a short cut this time over the ridge and down a gully which was full of ring-barked trees and long white grass. He had nearly reached its mouth when a great greasy black goanna clambered up a sapling from under his feet and looked fightable.

"Dang the jumpt-up thing!" cried the old man. "It 'gin me a start!"

At the foot of the sapling he espied an object which he at first thought was the blackened carcass of a sheep, but on closer examination discovered to be the body of a man; it lay with its forehead resting on its hands, dried to a mummy by the intense heat of the western summer.

"Me luck's in for the day and no mistake!" said the shepherd, scratching the back of his head, while he took stock of the remains. He picked up a stick and tapped the body on the shoulder; the flesh sounded like leather. He turned it over on its side; it fell flat on its back like a board, and the shrivelled eyes seemed to peer up at him from under the blackened wrists.

He stepped back involuntarily, but, recovering himself, leant on his stick and took in all the ghastly details.

There was nothing in the blackened features to tell aught of name or race, but the dress proclaimed the remains to be those of a European. The old man caught sight of a black bottle in the grass, close beside the corpse. This set him thinking. Presently he knelt down and examined the soles of the dead man's blucher boots, and then, rising with an air of conviction, exclaimed: "Brummy! by gosh!--busted up at last!

"I tole yer so, Brummy," he said impressively, addressing the corpse. "I allers told yer as how it 'ud be--an' here y'are, you thundering jumpt-up cuss-o'-God fool. Yer cud earn more'n any man in the colony, but yer'd lush it all away. I allers sed as how it 'ud end, an' now yer kin see fur y'self.

"I spect yer was a-comin' t' me t' get fixt up an' set straight agin; then yer was a-goin' to swear off, same as yer 'allers did; an' here y'are, an' now I expect I'll have t' fix yer up for the last time an' make yer decent, for 'twon't do t' leave yer alyin' out here like a dead sheep."

He picked up the corked bottle and examined it. To his great surprise it was nearly full of rum.

"Well, this gits me," exclaimed the old man; "me luck's in, this Christmas, an' no mistake. He must 'a' got the jams early in his spree, or he wouldn't be a-making for me with near a bottleful left. Howsomenever, here goes."

Looking round, his eyes lit up with satisfaction as he saw some bits of bark which had been left by a party of strippers who had been getting bark there for the stations. He picked up two pieces, one about four and the other six feet long, and each about two feet wide, and brought them over to the body. He laid the longest strip by the side of the corpse, which he proceeded to lift on to it.

"Come on, Brummy," he said, in a softer tone than usual, "ye ain't as bad as yer might be, considerin' as it must be three good months since yer slipped yer wind. I spect it was the rum as preserved yer. It was the death of yer when yer was alive, an' now yer dead, it preserves yer like--like a mummy."

Then he placed the other strip on top, with the hollow side downwards--thus sandwiching the defunct between the two pieces--removed the saddle-strap, which he wore for a belt, and buckled it round one end, while he tried to think of something with which to tie up the other.

"I can't take any more strips off my shirt," he said, critically examining the skirts of the old blue overshirt he wore. "I might get a strip or two more off, but it's short enough already. Let's see; how long have I been a-wearin' of that shirt; oh, I remember, I bought it jist two days afore Five Bob was pupped. I can't afford a new shirt jist yet; howsomenever, seein' it's Brummy, I'll jist borrow a couple more strips and sew 'em on agen when I git home."

He up-ended Brummy, and placing his shoulder against the middle of the lower sheet of bark, lifted the corpse to a horizontal position; then, taking the bag of bones in his hand, he started for home.

"I ain't a-spendin' sech a dull Christmas arter all," he reflected, as he plodded on; but he had not walked above a hundred yards when he saw a black goanna sidling into the grass.

"That's another of them theer dang things!" he exclaimed. "That's two I've seed this mornin'."

Presently he remarked: "Yer don't smell none too sweet, Brummy. It must 'a' been jist about the middle of shearin' when yer pegged out. I wonder who got yer last cheque. Shoo! theer's another black goanner--theer must be a flock of 'em."

He rested Brummy on the ground while he had another pull at the bottle, and, before going on, packed the bag of bones on his shoulder under the body, and he soon stopped again.

"The thunderin' jumpt-up bones is all skew-whift," he said. "'Ole on, Brummy, an' I'll fix 'em"--and he leaned the dead man against a tree while he settled the bones on his shoulder, and took another pull at the bottle.

About a mile further on he heard a rustling in the grass to the right, and, looking round, saw another goanna gliding off sideways, with its long snaky neck turned towards him.

This puzzled the shepherd considerably, the strangest part of it being that Five Bob wouldn't touch the reptile, but slunk off with his tail down when ordered to "sick 'em."

"Theer's sothin' comic about them theer goanners," said the old man at last. "I've seed swarms of grasshoppers an' big mobs of kangaroos, but dang me if ever I seed a flock of black goanners afore!"

On reaching the hut the old man dumped the corpse against the wall, wrong end up, and stood scratching his head while he endeavoured to collect his muddled thoughts; but he had not placed Brummy at the correct angle, and, consequently, that individual fell forward and struck him a violent blow on the shoulder with the iron toes of his blucher boots.

The shock sobered him. He sprang a good yard, instinctively hitching up his moleskins in preparation for flight; but a backward glance revealed to him the true cause of this supposed attack from the rear. Then he lifted the body, stood it on its feet against the chimney, and ruminated as to where he should lodge his mate for the night, not noticing that the shorter sheet of bark had slipped down on the boots and left the face exposed.

"I spect I'll have ter put yer into the chimney-trough for the night, Brummy," said he, turning round to confront the corpse. "Yer can't expect me to take yer into the hut, though I did it when yer was in a worse state than--Lord!"

The shepherd was not prepared for the awful scrutiny that gleamed on him from those empty sockets; his nerves received a shock, and it was some time before he recovered himself sufficiently to speak.

"Now, look a-here, Brummy," said he, shaking his finger severely at the delinquent, "I don't want to pick a row with yer; I'd do as much for yer an' more than any other man, an' well yer knows it; but if yer starts playin' any of yer jumpt-up pranktical jokes on me, and a-scarin' of me after a-humpin' of yer 'ome, by the 'oly frost I'll kick yer to jim-rags, so I will."

This admonition delivered, he hoisted Brummy into the chimney-trough, and with a last glance towards the sheep-yards, he retired to his bunk to have, as he said, a snooze.

He had more than a snooze, however, for when he woke, it was dark, and the bushman's instinct told him it must be nearly nine o'clock.

He lit a slush-lamp and poured the remainder of the rum into a pannikin; but, just as he was about to lift the draught to his lips, he heard a peculiar rustling sound overhead, and put the pot down on the table with a slam that spilled some of the precious liquor.

Five Bob whimpered, and the old shepherd, though used to the weird and dismal, as one living alone in the bush must necessarily be, felt the icy breath of fear at his heart.

He reached hastily for his old shot-gun, and went out to investigate. He walked round the but several times and examined the roof on all sides, but saw nothing. Brummy appeared to be in the same position.

At last, persuading himself that the noise was caused by possums or the wind, the old man went inside, boiled his billy, and, after composing his nerves somewhat with a light supper and a meditative smoke, retired for the night. He was aroused several times before midnight by the same mysterious sound overhead, but, though he rose and examined the roof on each occasion by the light of the rising moon, he discovered nothing.

At last he determined to sit up and watch until daybreak, and for this purpose took up a position on a log a short distance from the hut, with his gun laid in readiness across his knee.

After watching for about an hour, he saw a black object coming over the ridge-pole. He grabbed his gun and fired. The thing disappeared. He ran round to the other side of the hut, and there was a great black goanna in violent convulsions on the ground.

Then the old man saw it all. "The thunderin' jumpt-up thing has been a-havin' o' me," he exclaimed. "The same cuss-o'-God wretch has a-follered me 'ome, an' has been a-havin' its Christmas dinner off of Brummy, an' a-hauntin' o' me into the bargain, the jumpt-up tinker!"

As there was no one by whom he could send a message to the station, and the old man dared not leave the sheep and go himself, he determined to bury the body the next afternoon, reflecting that the authorities could disinter it for inquest if they pleased.

So he brought the sheep home early and made arrangements for the burial by measuring the outer casing of Brummy and digging a hole according to those dimensions.

"That 'minds me," he said. "I never rightly knowed Brummy's religion, blest if ever I did. Howsomenever, there's one thing sartin--none o' them theer pianer-fingered parsons is a-goin' ter take the trouble ter travel out inter this God-forgotten part to hold sarvice over him, seein' as how his last cheque's blued. But, as I've got the fun'ral arrangements all in me own hands, I'll do jestice to it, and see that Brummy has a good comfortable buryin'--and more's unpossible."

"It's time yer turned in, Brum," he said, lifting the body down.

He carried it to the grave and dropped it into one corner like a post. He arranged the bark so as to cover the face, and, by means of a piece of clothes-line, lowered the body to a horizontal position. Then he threw in an armful of gum-leaves, and then, very reluctantly, took the shovel and dropped in a few shovelfuls of earth.

"An' this is the last of Brummy," he said, leaning on his spade and looking away over the tops of the ragged gums on the distant range.

This reflection seemed to engender a flood of memories, in which the old man became absorbed. He leaned heavily upon his spade and thought.

"Arter all," he murmured sadly, "arter all--it were Brummy.

"Brummy," he said at last. "It's all over now; nothin' matters now--nothin' didn't ever matter, nor--nor don't. You uster say as how it 'ud be all right termorrer" (pause); "termorrer's come, Brummy--come fur you--it ain't come fur me yet, but--it's a-comin'."

He threw in some more earth.

"Yer don't remember, Brummy, an' mebbe yer don't want to remember-- \_I\_ don't want to remember--but--well, but, yer see that's where yer got the pull on me."

He shovelled in some more earth and paused again.

The dog rose, with ears erect, and looked anxiously first at his master and then into the grave.

"Theer oughter be somethin' sed," muttered the old man; "'tain't right to put 'im under like a dog. Theer oughter be some sort o' sarmin." He sighed heavily in the listening silence that followed this remark and proceeded with his work. He filled the grave to the brim this time, and fashioned the mound carefully with his spade. Once or twice he muttered the words, "I am the rassaraction." As he laid the tools quietly aside, and stood at the head of the grave, he was evidently trying to remember the something that ought to be said. He removed his hat, placed it carefully on the grass, held his hands out from his sides and a little to the front, drew a long deep breath, and said with a solemnity that greatly disturbed Five Bob: "Hashes ter hashes, dus ter dus, Brummy--an'--an' in hopes of a great an' gerlorious rassaraction!"

He sat down on a log near by, rested his elbows on his knees and passed his hand wearily over his forehead--but only as one who was tired and felt the heat; and presently he rose, took up the tools, and walked back to the hut.

And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush--the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird.

**In A Dry Season**

Draw a wire fence and a few ragged gums, and add some scattered sheep running away from the train. Then you'll have the bush all along the New South Wales western line from Bathurst on.

The railway towns consist of a public house and a general store, with a square tank and a school-house on piles in the nearer distance. The tank stands at the end of the school and is not many times smaller than the building itself. It is safe to call the pub "The Railway Hotel," and the store "The Railway Stores," with an "s." A couple of patient, ungroomed hacks are probably standing outside the pub, while their masters are inside having a drink--several drinks. Also it's safe to draw a sundowner sitting listlessly on a bench on the veranda, reading the \_Bulletin\_. The Railway Stores seem to exist only in the shadow of the pub, and it is impossible to conceive either as being independent of the other. There is sometimes a small, oblong weather-board building--unpainted, and generally leaning in one of the eight possible directions, and perhaps with a twist in another--which, from its half-obliterated sign, seems to have started as a rival to the Railway Stores; but the shutters are up and the place empty.

The only town I saw that differed much from the above consisted of a box-bark humpy with a clay chimney, and a woman standing at the door throwing out the wash-up water.

By way of variety, the artist might make a water-colour sketch of a fettler's tent on the line, with a billy hanging over the fire in front, and three fettlers standing round filling their pipes.

Slop sac suits, red faces, and old-fashioned, flat-brimmed hats, with wire round the brims, begin to drop into the train on the other side of Bathurst; and here and there a hat with three inches of crape round the crown, which perhaps signifies death in the family at some remote date, and perhaps doesn't. Sometimes, I believe, it only means grease under the band. I notice that when a bushman puts crape round his hat he generally leaves it there till the hat wears out, or another friend dies. In the latter case, he buys a new piece of crape. This outward sign of bereavement usually has a jolly red face beneath it. Death is about the only cheerful thing in the bush.

We crossed the Macquarie--a narrow, muddy gutter with a dog swimming across, and three goats interested.

A little farther on we saw the first sundowner. He carried a Royal Alfred, and had a billy in one hand and a stick in the other. He was dressed in a tail-coat turned yellow, a print shirt, and a pair of moleskin trousers, with big square calico patches on the knees; and his old straw hat was covered with calico. Suddenly he slipped his swag, dropped his billy, and ran forward, boldly flourishing the stick. I thought that he was mad, and was about to attack the train, but he wasn't; he was only killing a snake. I didn't have time to see whether he cooked the snake or not--perhaps he only thought of Adam.

Somebody told me that the country was very dry on the other side of Nevertire. It is. I wouldn't like to sit down on it any where. The least horrible spot in the bush, in a dry season, is where the bush isn't--where it has been cleared away and a green crop is trying to grow. They talk of settling people on the land! Better settle \_in\_ it. I'd rather settle on the water; at least, until some gigantic system of irrigation is perfected in the West.

Along about Byrock we saw the first shearers. They dress like the unemployed, but differ from that body in their looks of independence. They sat on trucks and wool-bales and the fence, watching the train, and hailed Bill, and Jim, and Tom, and asked how those individuals were getting on.

Here we came across soft felt hats with straps round the crowns, and full-bearded faces under them. Also a splendid-looking black tracker in a masher uniform and a pair of Wellington boots.

One or two square-cuts and stand-up collars struggle dismally through to the bitter end. Often a member of the unemployed starts cheerfully out, with a letter from the Government Labour Bureau in his pocket, and nothing else. He has an idea that the station where he has the job will be within easy walking distance of Bourke. Perhaps he thinks there'll be a cart or a buggy waiting for him. He travels for a night and day without a bite to eat, and, on arrival, he finds that the station is eighty or a hundred miles away. Then he has to explain matters to a publican and a coach-driver. God bless the publican and the coach-driver! God forgive our social system!

Native industry was represented at one place along the line by three tiles, a chimney-pot, and a length of piping on a slab.

Somebody said to me, "Yer wanter go out back, young man, if yer wanter see the country. Yer wanter get away from the line." I don't wanter; I've been there.

You could go to the brink of eternity so far as Australia is concerned and yet meet an animated mummy of a swagman who will talk of going "out back." Out upon the out-back fiend!

About Byrock we met the bush liar in all his glory. He was dressed like--like a bush larrikin. His name was Jim. He had been to a ball where some blank had "touched" his blanky overcoat. The overcoat had a cheque for ten "quid" in the pocket. He didn't seem to feel the loss much. "Wot's ten quid?" He'd been everywhere, including the Gulf country. He still had three or four sheds to go to. He had telegrams in his pocket from half a dozen squatters and supers offering him pens on any terms. He didn't give a blank whether he took them or no. He thought at first he had the telegrams on him but found that he had left them in the pocket of the overcoat aforesaid. He had learned butchering in a day. He was a bit of a scrapper himself and talked a lot about the ring. At the last station where he shore he gave the super the father of a hiding. The super was a big chap, about six-foot-three, and had knocked out Paddy Somebody in one round. He worked with a man who shore four hundred sheep in nine hours.

Here a quiet-looking bushman in a corner of the carriage grew restless, and presently he opened his mouth and took the liar down in about three minutes.

At 5.30 we saw a long line of camels moving out across the sunset. There's something snaky about camels. They remind me of turtles and goannas.

Somebody said, "Here's Bourke."

**The Loaded Dog**

Dave Regan, Jim Bently, and Andy Page were sinking a shaft at Stony Creek in search of a rich gold quartz reef which was supposed to exist in the vicinity. There is always a rich reef supposed to exist in the vicinity; the only questions are whether it is ten feet or hundreds beneath the surface, and in which direction. They had struck some pretty solid rock, also water which kept them baling. They used the old-fashioned blasting-powder and time-fuse. They'd make a sausage or cartridge of blasting-powder in a skin of strong calico or canvas, the mouth sewn and bound round the end of the fuse; they'd dip the cartridge in melted tallow to make it water-tight, get the drill-hole as dry as possible, drop in the cartridge with some dry dust, and wad and ram with stiff clay and broken brick. Then they'd light the fuse and get out of the hole and wait. The result was usually an ugly pot-hole in the bottom of the shaft and half a barrow-load of broken rock.

There was plenty of fish in the creek, fresh-water bream, cod, cat-fish, and tailers. The party were fond of fish, and Andy and Dave of fishing. Andy would fish for three hours at a stretch if encouraged by a 'nibble' or a 'bite' now and then--say once in twenty minutes. The butcher was always willing to give meat in exchange for fish when they caught more than they could eat; but now it was winter, and these fish wouldn't bite. However, the creek was low, just a chain of muddy water-holes, from the hole with a few bucketfuls in it to the sizable pool with an average depth of six or seven feet, and they could get fish by baling out the smaller holes or muddying up the water in the larger ones till the fish rose to the surface. There was the cat-fish, with spikes growing out of the sides of its head, and if you got pricked you'd know it, as Dave said. Andy took off his boots, tucked up his trousers, and went into a hole one day to stir up the mud with his feet, and he knew it. Dave scooped one out with his hand and got pricked, and he knew it too; his arm swelled, and the pain throbbed up into his shoulder, and down into his stomach too, he said, like a toothache he had once, and kept him awake for two nights--only the toothache pain had a 'burred edge', Dave said.

Dave got an idea.

'Why not blow the fish up in the big water-hole with a cartridge?' he said. 'I'll try it.'

He thought the thing out and Andy Page worked it out. Andy usually put Dave's theories into practice if they were practicable, or bore the blame for the failure and the chaffing of his mates if they weren't.

He made a cartridge about three times the size of those they used in the rock. Jim Bently said it was big enough to blow the bottom out of the river. The inner skin was of stout calico; Andy stuck the end of a six-foot piece of fuse well down in the powder and bound the mouth of the bag firmly to it with whipcord. The idea was to sink the cartridge in the water with the open end of the fuse attached to a float on the surface, ready for lighting. Andy dipped the cartridge in melted bees'-wax to make it water-tight. 'We'll have to leave it some time before we light it,' said Dave, 'to give the fish time to get over their scare when we put it in, and come nosing round again; so we'll want it well water-tight.'

Round the cartridge Andy, at Dave's suggestion, bound a strip of sail canvas--that they used for making water-bags--to increase the force of the explosion, and round that he pasted layers of stiff brown paper--on the plan of the sort of fireworks we called 'gun-crackers'. He let the paper dry in the sun, then he sewed a covering of two thicknesses of canvas over it, and bound the thing from end to end with stout fishing-line. Dave's schemes were elaborate, and he often worked his inventions out to nothing. The cartridge was rigid and solid enough now--a formidable bomb; but Andy and Dave wanted to be sure. Andy sewed on another layer of canvas, dipped the cartridge in melted tallow, twisted a length of fencing-wire round it as an afterthought, dipped it in tallow again, and stood it carefully against a tent-peg, where he'd know where to find it, and wound the fuse loosely round it. Then he went to the camp-fire to try some potatoes which were boiling in their jackets in a billy, and to see about frying some chops for dinner. Dave and Jim were at work in the claim that morning.

They had a big black young retriever dog--or rather an overgrown pup, a big, foolish, four-footed mate, who was always slobbering round them and lashing their legs with his heavy tail that swung round like a stock-whip. Most of his head was usually a red, idiotic, slobbering grin of appreciation of his own silliness. He seemed to take life, the world, his two-legged mates, and his own instinct as a huge joke. He'd retrieve anything: he carted back most of the camp rubbish that Andy threw away. They had a cat that died in hot weather, and Andy threw it a good distance away in the scrub; and early one morning the dog found the cat, after it had been dead a week or so, and carried it back to camp, and laid it just inside the tent-flaps, where it could best make its presence known when the mates should rise and begin to sniff suspiciously in the sickly smothering atmosphere of the summer sunrise. He used to retrieve them when they went in swimming; he'd jump in after them, and take their hands in his mouth, and try to swim out with them, and scratch their naked bodies with his paws. They loved him for his good-heartedness and his foolishness, but when they wished to enjoy a swim they had to tie him up in camp.

He watched Andy with great interest all the morning making the cartridge, and hindered him considerably, trying to help; but about noon he went off to the claim to see how Dave and Jim were getting on, and to come home to dinner with them. Andy saw them coming, and put a panful of mutton-chops on the fire. Andy was cook to-day; Dave and Jim stood with their backs to the fire, as Bushmen do in all weathers, waiting till dinner should be ready. The retriever went nosing round after something he seemed to have missed.

Andy's brain still worked on the cartridge; his eye was caught by the glare of an empty kerosene-tin lying in the bushes, and it struck him that it wouldn't be a bad idea to sink the cartridge packed with clay, sand, or stones in the tin, to increase the force of the explosion. He may have been all out, from a scientific point of view, but the notion looked all right to him. Jim Bently, by the way, wasn't interested in their 'damned silliness'. Andy noticed an empty treacle-tin--the sort with the little tin neck or spout soldered on to the top for the convenience of pouring out the treacle--and it struck him that this would have made the best kind of cartridge-case: he would only have had to pour in the powder, stick the fuse in through the neck, and cork and seal it with bees'-wax. He was turning to suggest this to Dave, when Dave glanced over his shoulder to see how the chops were doing--and bolted. He explained afterwards that he thought he heard the pan spluttering extra, and looked to see if the chops were burning. Jim Bently looked behind and bolted after Dave. Andy stood stock-still, staring after them.

'Run, Andy! run!' they shouted back at him. 'Run!!! Look behind you, you fool!' Andy turned slowly and looked, and there, close behind him, was the retriever with the cartridge in his mouth--wedged into his broadest and silliest grin. And that wasn't all. The dog had come round the fire to Andy, and the loose end of the fuse had trailed and waggled over the burning sticks into the blaze; Andy had slit and nicked the firing end of the fuse well, and now it was hissing and spitting properly.

Andy's legs started with a jolt; his legs started before his brain did, and he made after Dave and Jim. And the dog followed Andy.

Dave and Jim were good runners--Jim the best--for a short distance; Andy was slow and heavy, but he had the strength and the wind and could last. The dog leapt and capered round him, delighted as a dog could be to find his mates, as he thought, on for a frolic. Dave and Jim kept shouting back, 'Don't foller us! don't foller us, you coloured fool!' but Andy kept on, no matter how they dodged. They could never explain, any more than the dog, why they followed each other, but so they ran, Dave keeping in Jim's track in all its turnings, Andy after Dave, and the dog circling round Andy--the live fuse swishing in all directions and hissing and spluttering and stinking. Jim yelling to Dave not to follow him, Dave shouting to Andy to go in another direction--to 'spread out', and Andy roaring at the dog to go home. Then Andy's brain began to work, stimulated by the crisis: he tried to get a running kick at the dog, but the dog dodged; he snatched up sticks and stones and threw them at the dog and ran on again. The retriever saw that he'd made a mistake about Andy, and left him and bounded after Dave. Dave, who had the presence of mind to think that the fuse's time wasn't up yet, made a dive and a grab for the dog, caught him by the tail, and as he swung round snatched the cartridge out of his mouth and flung it as far as he could: the dog immediately bounded after it and retrieved it. Dave roared and cursed at the dog, who seeing that Dave was offended, left him and went after Jim, who was well ahead. Jim swung to a sapling and went up it like a native bear; it was a young sapling, and Jim couldn't safely get more than ten or twelve feet from the ground. The dog laid the cartridge, as carefully as if it was a kitten, at the foot of the sapling, and capered and leaped and whooped joyously round under Jim. The big pup reckoned that this was part of the lark--he was all right now--it was Jim who was out for a spree. The fuse sounded as if it were going a mile a minute. Jim tried to climb higher and the sapling bent and cracked. Jim fell on his feet and ran. The dog swooped on the cartridge and followed. It all took but a very few moments. Jim ran to a digger's hole, about ten feet deep, and dropped down into it--landing on soft mud--and was safe. The dog grinned sardonically down on him, over the edge, for a moment, as if he thought it would be a good lark to drop the cartridge down on Jim.

'Go away, Tommy,' said Jim feebly, 'go away.'

The dog bounded off after Dave, who was the only one in sight now; Andy had dropped behind a log, where he lay flat on his face, having suddenly remembered a picture of the Russo-Turkish war with a circle of Turks lying flat on their faces (as if they were ashamed) round a newly-arrived shell.

There was a small hotel or shanty on the creek, on the main road, not far from the claim. Dave was desperate, the time flew much faster in his stimulated imagination than it did in reality, so he made for the shanty. There were several casual Bushmen on the verandah and in the bar; Dave rushed into the bar, banging the door to behind him. 'My dog!' he gasped, in reply to the astonished stare of the publican, 'the blanky retriever--he's got a live cartridge in his mouth----'

The retriever, finding the front door shut against him, had bounded round and in by the back way, and now stood smiling in the doorway leading from the passage, the cartridge still in his mouth and the fuse spluttering. They burst out of that bar. Tommy bounded first after one and then after another, for, being a young dog, he tried to make friends with everybody.

The Bushmen ran round corners, and some shut themselves in the stable. There was a new weather-board and corrugated-iron kitchen and wash-house on piles in the back-yard, with some women washing clothes inside. Dave and the publican bundled in there and shut the door--the publican cursing Dave and calling him a crimson fool, in hurried tones, and wanting to know what the hell he came here for.

The retriever went in under the kitchen, amongst the piles, but, luckily for those inside, there was a vicious yellow mongrel cattle-dog sulking and nursing his nastiness under there--a sneaking, fighting, thieving canine, whom neighbours had tried for years to shoot or poison. Tommy saw his danger--he'd had experience from this dog--and started out and across the yard, still sticking to the cartridge. Half-way across the yard the yellow dog caught him and nipped him. Tommy dropped the cartridge, gave one terrified yell, and took to the Bush. The yellow dog followed him to the fence and then ran back to see what he had dropped.

Nearly a dozen other dogs came from round all the corners and under the buildings--spidery, thievish, cold-blooded kangaroo-dogs, mongrel sheep- and cattle-dogs, vicious black and yellow dogs--that slip after you in the dark, nip your heels, and vanish without explaining--and yapping, yelping small fry. They kept at a respectable distance round the nasty yellow dog, for it was dangerous to go near him when he thought he had found something which might be good for a dog to eat. He sniffed at the cartridge twice, and was just taking a third cautious sniff when----

It was very good blasting powder--a new brand that Dave had recently got up from Sydney; and the cartridge had been excellently well made. Andy was very patient and painstaking in all he did, and nearly as handy as the average sailor with needles, twine, canvas, and rope.

Bushmen say that that kitchen jumped off its piles and on again. When the smoke and dust cleared away, the remains of the nasty yellow dog were lying against the paling fence of the yard looking as if he had been kicked into a fire by a horse and afterwards rolled in the dust under a barrow, and finally thrown against the fence from a distance. Several saddle-horses, which had been 'hanging-up' round the verandah, were galloping wildly down the road in clouds of dust, with broken bridle-reins flying; and from a circle round the outskirts, from every point of the compass in the scrub, came the yelping of dogs. Two of them went home, to the place where they were born, thirty miles away, and reached it the same night and stayed there; it was not till towards evening that the rest came back cautiously to make inquiries. One was trying to walk on two legs, and most of 'em looked more or less singed; and a little, singed, stumpy-tailed dog, who had been in the habit of hopping the back half of him along on one leg, had reason to be glad that he'd saved up the other leg all those years, for he needed it now. There was one old one-eyed cattle-dog round that shanty for years afterwards, who couldn't stand the smell of a gun being cleaned. He it was who had taken an interest, only second to that of the yellow dog, in the cartridge. Bushmen said that it was amusing to slip up on his blind side and stick a dirty ramrod under his nose: he wouldn't wait to bring his solitary eye to bear--he'd take to the Bush and stay out all night.

For half an hour or so after the explosion there were several Bushmen round behind the stable who crouched, doubled up, against the wall, or rolled gently on the dust, trying to laugh without shrieking. There were two white women in hysterics at the house, and a half-caste rushing aimlessly round with a dipper of cold water. The publican was holding his wife tight and begging her between her squawks, to 'hold up for my sake, Mary, or I'll lam the life out of ye.'

Dave decided to apologise later on, 'when things had settled a bit,' and went back to camp. And the dog that had done it all, 'Tommy', the great, idiotic mongrel retriever, came slobbering round Dave and lashing his legs with his tail, and trotted home after him, smiling his broadest, longest, and reddest smile of amiability, and apparently satisfied for one afternoon with the fun he'd had.

Andy chained the dog up securely, and cooked some more chops, while Dave went to help Jim out of the hole.

And most of this is why, for years afterwards, lanky, easy-going Bushmen, riding lazily past Dave's camp, would cry, in a lazy drawl and with just a hint of the nasal twang--

''El-lo, Da-a-ve! How's the fishin' getting on, Da-a-ve?'