LEAVE THE HEADS ON 'EM

AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

by BILL SUTTON

foreword . . .

Many thanks to my mate, a shearer, whose assistance in choosing and making suggestions re the stories in this small volume has been invaluable.

Some of these stories have appeared previously in Sydney Tribune, Realist Writer (now The Realist), Overland, Fernfire (N.Z.) and other journals. Permission to reprint has been granted.

If any of my mates would like to comment on this booklet (good or bad) or just renew acquaintances, my address is:

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Published by W. Sutton, 11 Wren Street, Bowen Hills, Brisbane, Queensland.

leave the heads on 'em

I WAS trying to recall the other day when I first became interested in the trade union movement, and to my mind came these lines of a song, "And we'll eat the ram-stag mutton on the banks of the Condamine"—and I remember!

Let me tell you . . .

It was quite a year or two back. I was toiling on a sheep station in the west of Queensland—the first job I ever had. The Philanthropist I worked for gave me sixteen bob a week and keep, and so as to prevent me from being a juvenile delinquent worked me six and a half days a week, 12 hours a day. There was no room for complaint of course, for hadn't the boss himself been paid only 2/6 a week when he was my age, so really I was well off—that is I thought I was till the shearers came.

Before the shearing commenced, Lou and Vic, the other two station hands, kept warning me of the evil way of the shearers. It appears that Lou was sour on them mainly because they wanted him to switch his radio on to programs Lou did not usually listen to. (Wirelesses were scarce in those days.) I can still see Lou huddled up near the wireless religiously sticking to his regular program, and just as religiously switching it off the same time each night. Lou was in a rut—that was, of course, until the shearers came and upset the democratic traditions and high cultural standards of the galvanised iron ceilingless building that was our castle all the year round.

Vic told me, "God Almighty, these shearers they wanted the world—best of tucker; carbide lights, clean straw for the mattresses. God Almighty," said Vic, "a fair thing's a fair thing, but these shearers they are over the odds," and Vic says, "you can bet your life they will come out here drunk and have bottles of rum all over the place." Not that Vic was a wowser, because he used to get a bottle of rum out each week for himself, but that was different of course, for Vic told me rum was the only thing that would keep his bowels open. And Vic says, "If the sheep don't smell just right they may not even shear them."

"The cheeky cows," I think.

The big event of the year, the shearing, starts with a bang. The shearing team arrives in dribs and drabs. A taxi brought five, the contractor's lorry delivered three, the shearing gear, food, and the cook half in the horrors. About twelve o'clock that night the noisiest T model Ford in the world shattered the darkness and disgorged its load of four raucous, maudlin individuals singing merrily of "A hundred and twenty five green bottles hanging on the wall."

Vic stirs in the bed across the room from me as if to say, "I told you so."

"The bludgers," I think.

When I get up to milk the cows I am surprised to see the cook already out; and when I come back for breakfast the food he has laid out is just mighty—liver and bacon, cutlets, rissoles.

Vic and Lou have taken their usual places at the table so as the interlopers cannot seize their sacred citadels.

I am a little upset to see a very obviously unshiftable bloke has jumped my claim, and not only that, for when he sees my plate heaped high with the goodies, he complains loudly to the whole world in general that between the gorging ringers and rouseabouts he is a moral to finish up broke here just paying for tucker alone.

Vic and Lou give me a "What-did-I-tell-you" glance.

Some others of the team tell this bloke not to be such a hungry B and advise me to back up which I do. Claim jumper gives a groan.

I am to go to the shed with the boss to help pen up the sheep for the shearers. I am very surprised to see the shearing team get together before they start and elect a committee of three, of which, when I asked the boss the reason why, he told me that it was just one of the many silly things shearing teams do.

Dinner is beyond all my expectations, especially intrigued am I at the large tin dish of fruit salad which would have fed a fair-sized boarding house. I took enough for about six ordinary people. Claim jumper immediately named me "Holler-legs" which was my name with all from then on.

In the evening I had to kill a sheep for the next day's food. The boss pens up a stag and tells me to wait till after the shearers finish work and then kill same and be sure to burn the head as it is very unhygienic to leave such heads lying round. I could not make this out because when I look round the killing place there are heads of many types in various stages of health that have been lying there for years. But being an obedient boy I do what the boss says.

Now a stag looks good meat, but tastes and smells rank when cooked. Hanging in the meathouse he looks like a succulent piece of mutton, but a stag grows horns sometimes nearly as big as a ram, if you know what I mean.

About eleven o'clock the next day the cook goes up to the shed. He speaks to the rep. The rep finishes his sheep, straightens up carefully, pulls his machine out of gear. The cook talks angrily; they both make towards the boss and me in the pens. The rep asks the boss what is the idea of palming a stag off on them for meat. The boss, as innocent as a new born babe, says it was a wether. The cook says it was the funniest wether he ever cooked because it can be smelt all over the place.

The boss's tactics now change and he tells the rep he is boss and he will run the place as **he** likes.

The rep turns to me and says that when I kill the sheep, "LEAVE THE HEAD ON, SON."

The boss tells me there and then he is boss and I will do as HE says.

The rep and the cook walk quickly back, get the other two committee men together, speak to the six shearers one by one—as they finish their sheep they pull out of gear—the last fleece is skirted and rolled, the rouseabouts sweep up, the men get together. The expert has stopped the engine.

The boss is worried now. He walks towards the meeting. The meeting gets quiet, the boss and the rep snarl at one another. The rouseabouts start to act the goat, the boss walks back towards me.

The meeting breaks up . . . the engine starts . . . the shearers catch a sheep and start work again. I think the boss has told these boys a thing or two, but his face shows no sign of victory as he walks towards me and says, **"When you kill tonight lad, kill a good wether and leave the bloody head on the mongrel thing."**

automation

DON'T ask Eggy Wilson about Automation or he will grumble like a man possessed—and for why should Eggy play up when this word is mentioned? Well! Eggy was one of those blokes who never seemed to settle down to a bit of steady work. He tried his hand at various jobs, but was a failure at them all. Still everyone is cut out for something or other, even blokes like Eggy, and one day sure enough he found the job he could throw his heart and soul into.

What was this job? Well it goes under many names—its most redeeming feature is that no apprenticeship has to be served. It was—a Guardian of the night—a sanitary man's job.

Eggy really performed well at this noble art—. His boss, the Shire Clerk, now and again had to gently chastise him about one or two small incidents that occurred. For instance, Eggy didn't mind so much the times he got chipped for the sign he had painted with great skill and care on the side of his horse driven waggon, "YOU CALL AND WE'LL HAUL," but he deeply resented being made to remove it.

Then there was the occasion of the party that some of the local Big-Wigs were having in their back yard. Was it Eggy's fault that their outhouse (a double one) was also in the same back yard? Was it Eggy's fault that he had to make two trips through the gay party crowd with pan on shoulder? Maybe the fact that he kept yelling out in a loud voice as he proceeded through the throng of well-dressed people such expressions as "Gangway," "Excuse please" or "Out of the way mug," accentuated his presence. Whatever it was, he was severely taken to task by the Shire Clerk the next day. Eggy's only defence was that the crowd at the party must have been a most unhygienic mob if they did not want their pan service carried out. This rather clever deduction failed to impress the Shire Clerk who put Eggy on his last chance.

Apart from these minor incidents life moved on for Eggy.

He graduated to a motor driven vehicle—and on the occasion of his 15th year of service, he was presented with an illuminated address for a job being well done.

Then deep deep disaster fell. The town council decided to instal sewerage. Eggy heard the news in silence. He knew he was on the way out. Automation had caught up with him. No more would there be need for his beloved lorry and pans, he was a broken man. He could see that sewerage was a progressive move, but no one could convince Eggy that there was anything progressive about losing his job. He considered ways and means of retaining his employment. Such things as a one man stay-in strike entered his mind. But then the thought of staying on someone's W.C. for an indefinite period does not appeal even to blokes like Eggy, even though he was used to the environment. And so Finis to Eggy Wilson.

Now if you ever happen to see a dejected figure in some little town—don't laugh—it may be someone who is the victim of Automation. You could be next! So you'd better start to think out some ideas better than Eggy had if you don't want to finish like him.

tinenburra

CAN I write—Well I suppose I can say without boasting that I am the author of a works which caused more trouble and excitement than anything ever yet written.

It was many years ago. The shearing was on at Tinenburra. I was the babbling brook. We used to ride horses, bikes, or walk to sheds in those days. Shearing started two hours before breakfast and you got a pound a hundred for pushing it off with the tongs. You know, the good old days.

Now in case you have never heard of Tinenburra let me explain a few details to you. In certain other States the biggest shed in the country is supposed to be somewhere in the Speewah. But those lying cows know that Tinenburra was ten times bigger in every way. Any Queenslander will vouch for this. However some people have tended to exaggerate some aspects of Tinenburra. For instance it was not true that the boss of the board used to ride up and down on a motorbike. Motorbikes were uncommon in those days and as the board was only half a mile long he could easily do the job on his horse.

Well, about the writing. It all started when me and one of my offsiders were rowing out in the boat to skim the soup we made in a thousand gallon tank, when this offsider asks me if I would write a bit of a play.

He said the boys all liked my last poem circulating round the shed, which intimated that one of the woolclassers would have great difficulty in establishing the fact he had a father. He said he thought personally that the genius of the poem was in the fact that I had found so many words to rhyme with a well known swear word.

I must admit there is nothing much to my poems if the swearing is taken out of them, but they say it's a free country.

I agreed to write the play, as I knew the boys needed a bit of variety in a shed where there are two million sheep to be shorn and in the first three months of work everyone was sick and tired of seeing the conventional Nell Gwynn and Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Well I wrote a corker play, but had I known the consequences, I would never have been in it. I don't know if you have seen one of these plays. They don't happen in these days as the sheds are much smaller. But at Tinenburra with its two thousand shearers, shed hands, etc., we put on some mighty efforts.

My play called for a couple of female players. This presented some difficulties, as only men and boys are employed in sheds. However a couple of rouseabouts with wool caps wrapped round them and their trousers rolled up, filled this want.

Great was the excitement as the curtain of woolbales rolled back. The slush lamps that lined the stage, gave a light good enough to take the rough edges off the bush rafters.

Back stage the girl rouseabouts consulted the rum bottle heavily, the other players not so heavily but still too much.

The villain was being played by a wool roller, who, rumour had it, had been a leading actor till he fell by hard times.

Could that man act? He had the big audience out the front who were perched on woolbales, booing and hissing him all the time.

Then came the part that made history. The villain was throwing one of the girl rouseabouts about, and he was doing it real well. The hero who was a shearer from Victoria was to go on to the stage and say dramatically "Unhand that maiden you villain." But carried away with emotion and rum, he raced on to the stage, hit the villain clean between the eyes with a beautiful straight left and said, "Cop that, you bastard."

Most of the blokes were glad to see the villain get his just deserts, but he had a few mates in the audience, who ran on stage and a real blue started. The wool bale curtains caught alight and the shed got knocked about a little.

The next day the boss of the board informed us that the station owners wanted us all to pay for the few lousy old wool bales that were burnt.

We went on strike for three days and finished up getting a dollar a hundred extra and not having to pay for the wool bales.

And you ask me if I could write. Well not as good as Banjo Paterson of course. But did you ever know anyone else to write a play that caused a fight, a fire, and get five bob extra a hundred for shearing.

a pair of pants

I DON'T expect I ever told you about the time I fought Knockout Jones in the ring, but I'll bet Mr. Jones has told a few people about this great event, because on that occasion he was the victor.

It seems he acquired the name Knockout only because of the fact that everyone he engaged in battle knocked him out. In fact, till he met me he was still a maiden performer.

However, things are not as they always appear on the surface, for you see normally I could have belted the ears off Knockout. But circumstances alter cases and this case proved to be no exception.

When the above mentioned contest took place our country was in the midst of the big economic depression of the 30's. Very few people had any money to throw about, including myself. The boxing tournaments proved to be very popular, providing cheap entertainment for the public.

I mainly fought the four one-and-a-half minute rounds, with a minutes spell, and I had won quite a few of these scraps, so that when the names came out of the hat and I had drawn Knockout I was at once a firm favourite with the betting fraternity.

I tried to back myself to beat Knockout, but only scornful laughter greeted my attempts. Dark thoughts entered my mind—after a struggle with my conscience for about ten seconds, I decided the quickest way to fame and fortune was to place whatever monies I had on my unworthy opponent.

All the money I could rake up, including the dole, was two pounds, and through a middle man sworn to secrecy and promised ten shillings of the winnings, I backed Knockout at the very good price of two to one.

It seems that when a person knows he is to come into wealth

his mind works overtime planning how to spend it—my thoughts were modest but exciting—a new pair of pants and a bit of tucker.

The night of the big event arrived—the first few fights were soon over—then our bout came along—I was first in the ring—Knockout came out from the dressing-rooms into the other corner—he looked like a world's champion. He was shadow sparring and making primeval noises. His dressing-gown was monogrammed in huge letters. He was wearing shiny black trunks with white stripes up the side—in fact he had everything but ability.

His entrance to the ring was greeted with cheers, boos, calls of "fancy pants," and words of advice but to a seasoned campaigner like Knockout these fell on deaf ears.

The referee was Basher Johnstone, an old time pug. He walked to Knockout's corner, felt his gloves to see if the padding was O.K., then walked to my corner. As he bent down to feel my gloves, he said words that will remain etched in my memory forever. Maybe these words were not as famous as say, "Kiss me Hardy," but at that particular moment had as much historical significance to me. What did Basher say? His exact words were, out of the corner of his mouth—"You will have every chance, I have bet four pounds to two on you."

As you can imagine, my heart dropped down near my big toe—here I was in a ten by ten boxing ring, to fight a bloke who had great difficulty in beating a carpet, with a referee who was backing me to win, and me with my last penny on my opponent. My dreams of new pants left me, but I kept cool—I had to make a quick decision. I decided the first time Knockout landed a punch on me I would go down. If I didn't do this quickly I could see the referee giving the fight to me for sure.

The call came, "Seconds out"—my second climbed out of the ring taking the stool with him as I stood up—"time"—we went to the centre of the ring, touched gloves and we were off.

Well that Knockout, he sparred, lunged, pranced, feinted and sidestepped but do you think he would swing a punch? I had to go in to make it look good. I decided to try to make Knockout do his block so I hit him on the nose—hard enough to make it bleed, soft enough not to win the fight.

Knockout dropped his guard, for a moment I thought he was going to burst into tears—I heard the ref. say softly yet excitedly

—"Give him a straight left," but I can tell you, the last thing I would have done was lead a straight left, I sparred. I noticed the ref. gave me a dirty look. I reckoned he must be at least half awake as to what was going on—I'd better get down on that floor quicker than soon.

I see Knockout getting ready to swing a punch. I walk in close. I have plenty of time as this punch started one inch from the floor and finished as high as Knockout could reach. If he had connected properly you could have dug my skull out of the ceiling. I'll guarantee that punch would have missed me by three feet if I had not stepped in and let it brush me—that was enough—down I went—A deadly silence that I was supposed to be too unconscious to hear filled the hall. The ref. was reluctant to start counting of course. I felt like telling him to hurry up, but this would have been awkward at that moment.

The count started. The ref. bent over me. "One"—a pause—"Two"—a pause—"Three"—he bent right down, "Get up you B——," he whispered viciously. I could have told him to save his breath—that rough floor felt like a feather bed to me.

The count finished. They carried me from the ring and I revived quickly.

And so it was that Knockout won his first and last fight. Flushed with victory he has many more fights but no more wins.

No moral to this story you say—of course there is—a clear cut one—and that is, "Never bet on anything that can talk."

sticking to the award

ALL the way out to the shed old Fred kept wanting to get out —either to vomit, or to vanish mysteriously behind the nearest tree.

He was a thin little bloke in his sixties, with a careless, droopy moustache.

Tomcat Timkins used to grumble most severely every time this happened, but then Tomcat would growl if it rained motor cars and refrigerators. The rest of the lads knew old Fred. True, he was a bit of a menace when full; but as one of the boys said to Tomcat, everyone gets old sooner or later.

There were six of us in the old Oldsmobile—four shearers and two rouseabouts, with our swags and gear tied on top and sides. We were part of a team going to shear at Southhampton Downs—not a big shed; six shearers in all and about another seven blokes. The Downs had ewes as big as wethers and wethers as big as poddy calves, but much tougher. As a matter of fact when you went into the pen to catch one of these wethers, you had to keep a close eye on him in case he put a Boston Crab on you . . . As Henry Lawson put it, "a rough shed."

Next morning as we went to start work, old Fred, looking sick and sorry, cut a comical figure in his patched flannel, strapped dungarees, and bag boots, his water bag in one hand and combs and cutters in the other. However, Fred wasn't out to win no mannequin parade.

Well, we signed on, drew for possies, and got a start.

The first day never seems to end even if you're well, but if you're crow sick—man, oh man, what agony!

Old Fred drank gallons of water, put his finger down his throat, nibbled at his tucker, but could only shear 88 for the day. In his prime his could blow it off a couple of hundred a day,

but he was well past his best. A life of hard toil and hard living had made him a snagger—a hundred a day man—only getting sheds when shearers were short. Knowing no other occupation, he stuck to shearing, although in latter years he had been forced to take a few burr cutting jobs to help keep the pot boiling.

Carbine Smithe-Browne, the boss of the board, was a tough bird and we knew that if he could have got a better shearer Fred would have missed out. He kept a critical eye on Fred.

About the third day Fred was OK and was worrying it off about 105 or 110. He hummed softly as he worked.

Then towards the end of the week we got on to a tough batch of wethers. Fred was never out of strife. Just before the end of the day he was going up the neck of a wether that would have made Primo Carnera look a midget . . . when he cut the Juggler.

Carbine waited till he stitched the wound and finished the sheep, and then told Fred to finish up and leave on the wool lorry next morning.

Fred pulled off his handpiece, took his comb and cutter off, threaded them on his wire, picked up his waterbag and went to the huts.

We were on our last few sheep, and as soon as we finished we also made for the huts, where we expressed our sympathy with Fred.

A couple of us wanted the team to all pull out with Fred. This didn't get much response, but we were all worried. Only Tomcat voiced the opinion that Fred would have to go. He reckoned once you got old you should live on the pension. A very stupid statement, as even Tomcat should know that a flea suffering from loss of appetite would not be satisfied on the pension.

We did not hold a meeting, but argued and debated, debated and argued, then turned in. Many a bed creaked with the tossing of uneasy bodies.

In the morning as we walked towards the shed, we looked back at Fred patiently sitting on his swag. I think we were all thinking the same thing—that after all these years of hard yakka all Fred had for his trouble was a thin swag, and now he was to be cast out on the scrap heap. After all, if you can shear 100 a day you still make plenty for the bosses, though not as much as the bloke who can shear 200 a day, of course.

When we got to the shed our Union rep and his committee gathered us together. It appeared they had had a prior discussion. They suggested to us that as the sheep seemed to be wet we should have a vote on them.

Here I must explain that when sheep get wet from rain, dew or anything else it is not only unpleasant to shear them, but highly dangerous, as the steam rising from the hot, damp bodies and machinery is liable to give colds, rheumatics and other such-like illnesses that even large doses of rum will not cure.

The procedure is to decide by secret ballot whether the sheep are wet or not. Each shearer is given two pieces of cardboard, one with WET and one with DRY written on it. The ballot boxes are generally, but not necessarily, tobacco tins. Votes are cast and checked with the remaining slips in another tin. Democratic and foolproof. Majority rules. A dead-heat, or even vote, as it is called, means shear on. Rouseabouts don't vote.

When we heard this suggestion of a vote we were struck by one peculiar fact, and that was that no rain or dew to speak of had fallen for about six months, and so scarce had even clouds been that it was said that parents of five-year-olds were anxiously waiting for the first cumulus, stratus, or even any mongrel breed of cloud to appear so that they could point same out to their offspring, instead of having to rely on pictures.

But we knew what was on—and prepared for the vote.

Five to one WET, said the ballot. Tomcat looked funny.

The boss of the board went beserk; made towards the homestead to see the station owner.

The union rep made a phone call to the union office. We went back to the huts. Fred sat on his swag.

After about an hour the bosses hove in sight and called for the committee, telling them they wanted a vote every two hours. The committee agreed, knowing this was the award.

We voted again at smoko. Five to one WET. Then went back to the huts. The wool lorry came into view. The rep told old Fred that he could please himself whether he went on the lorry or not, but he had heard that it was mighty dangerous to ride on top of a load of wool—mighty dangerous.

Fred unrolled his swag. Tomcat strolled over to yarn with him. We could hear snatches of the conversation . . . '91 strike . . . Helped build the union . . . Lost wife . . .

We voted again after dinner—six to none WET. Tomcat appeared uncomfortable.

The boss asked us what was wrong (as if he didn't know!). Was the tucker crook? The rep said "No, it's just these sopping wet sheep that worry us."

The boss suggested that perhaps if they put old Fred back in the team that might make a difference, and that he could start next day.

We were not worried about Fred, the rep told him, only wet sheep, but as a matter of not much importance he would tell the boys Fred would be back on the job in the morning.

We voted again that afternoon. Six to none DRY.

"hard work never hurt anybody"

GRANDFATHER went crook when he found out I was on Compo.

"The country's going to the dogs," he said. "In my day," he continued, "when we hurt ourselves we worker harder—I remember a job I once had, felling timber, we swung that old axe from daylight till dark. No television for us when the day's work was over, we used to just drop on to our bunks and sleep pretty sound I can tell you. One day I made a swing with the old blade at a green limb, the axe glances off, bang, right into me foot. Me mates pull that old blutcher boot of mine off mighty quick, and there was a gash about four inches long—Did it bleed—The boys got me back to camp, we bathed her with Condy Chrystals, then back on the old kelly again. I've still got a bit of a limp, and in rainy weather the old foot plays up so bad that I can't sleep. Still it taught me a lesson."

The old fellow took a draw of his pipe and went on, "Then there was the time I sliced the top off my little finger when I worked in a slaughter yard—The boss here was a mighty old bloke. He done me work for me till I got right, course he docked me pay for the time I missed but then that's fair enough. This boss told me he had it on good authority, that if you lost some part of yourself, that you develop some other part of your body, for instance, he said if you went deaf, your eyesight would most likely become keener—so he worked it out that maybe now that I had lost a finger on one hand, the rest of the fingers would get stronger. I found this to be a very wise statement, as I quickly learned to use the other fingers well. However one day off went the top of another one. The boss told me he could stand this no longer, as eventually I must run out of fingers and be no good to him. I was sorry to have to leave this bloke after all the good turns he had done fer me. Having those two fingers off made it a bit harder fer me—but I soon got round that, when I was applying for a job I would keep the old dook in me pocket—quite

casual like. In those days the bosses were a bit particular who they employed. I was off work fer quite a while, when at last I cracked it fer a good job—making bricks—I was lucky to get this job because the bloke who had the job before me died with some disease he had, some of the union blokes were kicking up a hell of a fuss, claiming that the dusty conditions of the place had been the cause of his death—The boss told me this was a lot of rot—he also told me that the last bloke (now deceased) was not much of a worker and that it was commonly known that this particular dust would not affect strong working blokes. 'A fair day's work for a fair day's pay,' he said.

"I was there fer about a year when I started to feel crook—I knew it could not be the dust as I was working extra hard—I took big doses of salts, but to no avail. One day after I had a bad coughing attack, the boss called me over and told me he was very sorry but the brick trade was terrible and that as he was reducing staff he would very reluctantly have to let me go—he would give me the very best references—he heard they wanted fruitpickers at a town 200 miles away, and he strongly urged me to go there—I appreciated this kind information.

"As I was leaving this place I saw about twenty blokes queued up outside—They said they were waiting for a job. I told them about the bad position of the brick trade—They told me they would stick around as there had been an ad in the local paper saying this brickworks wanted a labourer. I was a little puzzled to think that the trade could have picked up so quickly."

Grandfather's pipe had gone out. His eyes stared as he concentrated on his reminiscences.

"Yes, times have changed," he said, "a nation of softies, painless childbirth—picture shows—compensation—what next? As I said before who did hard work ever hurt. By the way, is it ten o'clock yet—I've got to see the quack at eleven—the old hernia's playing up again—Got it cutting cane up north."

a hat full of silver

ONCE upon a time, roughly, historically speaking, when there was still meat in meat pies—I went droving.

Barlow Johnstone was the boss drover—we took a thousand head of cattle from Elizabeth Downs to Bourke.

Old Barlow wasn't a bad bloke—he was one of the chief drovers for Elizabeth Downs Pastoral Company—which was one of the biggest in the world, and whose owners had never seen the place because they lived in England.

Barlow had been droving for so long that he practically knew every tuft of Mitchell Grass in Queensland, and was familiar with a blade or two in New South Wales.

I soon found out his main ambition was to own a champion racehorse. Even when he was on the road with the bullocks, he would always have his racehorses nominated in one or two of the towns along the stock routes.

He thought all his horses were Phar Laps. But most of them raced like draught horses.

If there were races, say, in Longreach, and Barlow's plant was within fifty miles of the place—Barlow's horses were sure to be nominated.

For many days Barlow would have a strange faraway look in his eyes. Then he would saddle up and make his way to that race meeting. He would take with him money to place with great faith on his champions which he always assured us were the greatest certainties that had ever poked their heads through a bridle.

Life for us would then go on without Barlow, until one day he would arrive back at camp, sick from grog, and with a million excuses why his horses had failed to graduate.

We would have already known of these defeats, because even in the lonely West, bad news travels fast.

I well recall the team of blokes on that trip. But the bloke I remember best was the Mission boy—Billy White Teeth. Like all Mission lads he was hired out at a cheap rate—given a small sum weekly—and the rest of the money was put in trust for him. Some unscrupulous boss drovers would cheat these lads out of even these small wages by getting them drunk in some town and throwing a handful of silver coins into the ten gallon hats of these boys—Thereby liquidating their debts.

Old Barlow would not come at this—He had a fair bit of principle in many ways. For instance when the A.W.U. organiser drove up in his car, to see if we were in the Union, and some of the boys were going crook about having to pay out good money for a union ticket, Barlow used to tell them at least they had some protection—he had none from the people who employed him. Elizabeth Downs had forced him to cut his contract price three years running, and he had to take it or leave it.

Barlow used to point out that because his contract price was slashed, he had to cut down on the quality of his stock horses.

We could easily believe this when we saw them—one in particular caught the eye. A big, rangy yellow bay gelding, with an eye as wicked as Helen of Troy's.

Old Barlow offered a quid to any of us to take the sting out of that horse.

He raised the offer to thirty bob and the Mission boy decided to have a go—thirty bob was a fair bit of money to this lad.

That boy could ride—he soon took the wicked look out of the yellow bay's eyes.

We were all worried when Barlow decided to use this horse for the night watch . . .

I don't know if you've ever driven cattle—you have to take turn about on watch of a night—you ride round them, and you must make a steady noise, such as singing so as not to frighten the temperamental creatures.

Of course when you get to Winton the stock route fences start, and you can let the cattle go during the night. This is

against the law. But whoever has considered anything really illegal that allowed cattle to rest contented and men to sleep soundly?

I recall it all vividly now—it was before we had come to the fences—it was a beautiful western night—the air was cool—the stars brilliant—I was on watch with the Mission lad. I was murdering "South of the Border," and I could hear him round the other side singing over and over again, "Little cow and calfy—Little cow and calfy," as is the custom of Mission boys who do not know the words of white folks' songs—All of a sudden every bullock jumped to its feet and away they went—maybe a 'roo startled them, maybe a bird—who knows.

When they rushed the Mission boy and I raced to wheel them, for this is the only way to stop them, keeping turning the leaders in on the others—easier said than done—I saw the Mission lad and his yellow bay go to the lead. The horse was panicky, throwing his head around—the next thing he was down, and a thousand head of prime cattle went over a good boy and a bad horse.

Who was to blame—the horse? Hardly. Barlow, for having a crook stock horse? Or Elizabeth Downs Pastoral Company for cutting the contract price?

Well, after all, this is only my story—your job is to work it out.

where there's smoke there's insurance

MY mate, Jumbo, told me you could always tell when there was a depression on, or impending, by the amount of fires about.

When asked to amplify this statement, he said that many a person had got a kick in life by burning down a factory or business that had been going broke, and collecting the insurance.

I could not believe there were people about who would cheat insurance companies out of their hard won gains, but when pressed further Jumbo produced conclusive evidence that such things were not only possible, but that he himself had been at one time implicated. Here is the story as he told me.

"Years ago," said Jumbo, "I was touring the country, like the snail, I carried my home on my back. I had been roaming about for years looking for work, and I wasn't Robinson Crusoe either, I had plenty of mates, but jobs were practically non-existent.

"One day I strolled into a town just in time to catch my dole. As you know we were forced to collect our dole in a different town each time, a law which no doubt was fair for millionaires as well as bagmen. I was walking up the main drag of this joint, looking for the C.P.S. office where the dole was graciously handed out, when a voice I had not heard for years said, 'Jumbo, you old so and so. Is it you?' As it was me I turned in the direction of the voice, and there, framed in the swinging doors of a pub was my old mate, Johnny Power. I went over and Johnny shook my hand so hard that dust flew out of me everywhere, swag and all. Johnny and I used to knock about together years before. We used to do a bit of station or shed work. Johnny way always a bit of a go-getter, if we went to a place to work, he always had a sideline or two such as running the game or betting S.P. It was well recognised that such a go ahead bloke like Johnny would either finish up a millionaire or in the Peter,

"Johnny and I had parted ways many years before. The last time I had heard of him he was clerking for a bookie in Bourke.

"It appeared that Johnny was the proprietor of the establishment whose doors he now held open with his well dressed figure. He invited me in for a beer. I nearly knocked the swinging doors down getting into the bar before he changed his mind. When my throat is wet enough I mention to Johnny that we appear to be the only drinkers. Johnny sighs and tells me that after years of scrimping, saving and dealing from the bottom of the deck, he had put his life savings into the biggest white elephant of a pub ever, just as the depression started, and now what with the breweries and the banks pushing him he was just about under. After we had about six beers and I had not paid for any I can see Johnny getting toey so I am expecting the shove any moment, but to my surprise Johnny asked me if I would like to make some money. I think it is mighty funny that a bloke who is rapidly on his way to the poor-house should be offering finance to other people, but Johnny makes it quite clear that he had very ulterior motives.

"He puts his cards on the table and asks me if I would like to make a hundred quid tax free.

"I told him for a hundred quid I would fight Les Darcy and wrestle Whiskers Blake in the one ring at the same time. Seeing I am so keen Johnny then enquires if I had previous experience in burning down buildings for insurance. I thought quickly. The biggest fire I had ever started before was when I wanted to boil the billy, but without batting an eyelid I assured Johnny that I was wanted in at least ten towns in Australia and one in New Zealand for arson. I can see Johnny doubts this but he too was desperate. We made plans. I was to kid I do not know him from a bar of soap. On the following night he would make a business trip to a neighbouring town. He gave me the key to a back door of the pub. I would go to a certain room where all the necessary material to burn down the place would be situated.

"The next night I waited till midnight and entered the hotel and went to the appointed room. Here I found a bottle of kerosene and a pile of wood. I applied the kerosene to the wood in my best professional manner and lit same, then I went full pelt out of the building before I got burnt to death. I made my way to my camp just outside town near the trucking yards and turned my gaze back towards town, cheerily waiting for my £100 blaze to illuminate the landscape.

"Never was a person doomed to such disappointment. Not

even a spark or a puff of smoke emerged. The town slumbered on. I felt like going back to have another go but I was not game. I slowly rolled the old bluey and matildered out of town without even waiting for daylight.

"Well," concluded Jumbo, "I have never yet found out why that pub didn't burn down. I can only conclude that the good Lord was on the side of the insurance companies as they are more God fearing than me."

"What happened to Johnny?" I asked.

Jumbo signed and replied, "After the breweries took over his pub Johnny was left without a cracker. The last I heard of him he was selling fire insurance."

never trust a policeman

WE walked out of the town laughing to ourselves.

We had been smart enough to get fed for a week in the hungry depression days.

Our tactics were to make sure we got caught jumping the rattler, and get a few days jail complete with tucker.

Fred, my mate, was our legal adviser on these matters, a real bush lawyer, a master tactician. He would sum up the police sergeant and just be provocative enough to receive the maximum sentence.

The sergeant in the last town had asked when charging us, "How much money have you got in the bank?"

Without blinking an eyelid Fred replied, "Ten thousand pounds."

"Don't be so bloody silly," said the sergeant.

"You started it," said Fred.

The sergeant's face reddened. Later his evidence got us a seven-day sentence.

We could have jumped for joy.

And so were on the way out of that town to catch another rattler.

As we waited for the train Fred told me that he had the drum from one of the other tourists who had served time with

us, that the police sergeant in the next town was loth to pinch rattler jumping bagmen. Not that he was a particularly good-hearted individual, but his wife had threatened divorce proceedings if she had to cook for the many bagmen who were likely to be brought home by her husband as guests of the government.

Fred informed me, however, there was no need to worry. He had our campaign all planned.

We crawled into a tarpaulin-covered waggon as the train pulled slowly up the grade.

We slept and yarned to pass the time away—then at a siding just outside of our next expected eating place, we slipped into a first class carriage.

When the train pulled into the station, the citizens on the platform must have received a shock, when out of a first class carriage stepped two dusty bagmen complete with swags, black billies, and all the trimmings.

We looked around hopefully for the local constabulary—it was nowhere in sight. The station master-cum-ticket collector took one glance and then ignored us completely.

The old fox, Fred, was in a fix, but motioned me to follow him.

Enquiring the direction of the local police station we made toward our only hope for food and shelter.

As we were proceeding a wondrous sight met our eyes. The police sergeant, resplendent in his uniform; we quickened our pace. As we drew abreast of him, he tried to step around us with a side-step that would have assured him of a place in any rugby league or soccer team in the world. But victory was in our grasp, so with a replying side-step Fred neatly check-mated the sergeant.

After numerous moves of a like nature, which looked like ending in a draw, Fred said firmly and clearly, "We have just jumped the train into town."

A scornful scowl was the policeman's reply.

Fred appeared to have met his match, but with a last despairing attempt he jibed, "Don't tell us you are taking the taxpayers' money under false pretences!"

"You can go to hell," said the sergeant, as he brushed past Fred and went in search of a crime elsewhere in that practically sinless town—his marital life safe and sound.

We hungrily walked out of that town determined to spread the news far and near for bagmen to beware of this place with its spineless sergeant.

Fred always said you could never trust a policeman.

Printed by Coronation Printery, 583 Wynnum Road, Morningside, Brisbane.