

CHAPTER ONE

~ On the wallaby, back o' Bourke ~

A rat scampers across Druitt-street from the gaslight into the dark, and disappears silently into a drain behind Sydney Town Hall.

Inside, the small, black-haired man in the neat kilt smiles down from the stage at nearly four thousand happy people, while to his right the mayor, apparently more than slightly shickered, meanders towards the wings and almost falls over a chair.

“Lord Jersey and Lady Jersey, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,” the confident little man in the kilt declaims. “I thank Sir William for his warm welcome and may I say, aye what a privilege it is to stand on the stage of our *grrrrrand* Town Hall (which I am assured will one day be completed). And here we have the *worrld*'s most magnificent organ ... but ... *ahem* ... are there no bagpipes?”

Glowing with New Year's Eve cheer, the audience laughs uproariously.

“I stand afore ye proudly wearing the badge of my clan with its glorious words, ‘I Am Ready’.”

He also stands before them neatly attired in Clan Fraser tartan, with dress sporran and Prince Charlie jacket, starched white shirt and bow tie, and you can be sure that the dirk inside its sheath is polished like a new mirror.

“Now, it would give me occasion to tell ye the tale of when ‘The Hammer of the Scots’ tried to beat against the Anvil of Scottish Freedom at blessed Roslin Muir ... but I am sure our happy Hogmanay is not the night for a lecture on how ...” his voice rises, “Sir Symon Fraser of Neidpath *trrrrrounced* King Edward's thirty thousand Sassenachs in a single day!”

Amidst the hilarity the speaker looks sheepishly towards the Governor, the 7th Earl of Jersey, and his Scottish wife (both of whom beam back

generous approbation), and he waits again to speak over the mirth, the loudest of it from the Scots among the audience.

“No, dear friends, I have been asked to sing a song by Scotland’s immortal bard, *Rrrrabbie Burrerruns* – and ...” theatrically he looks at his clan badge and touches it, “ladies and gentlemen ... *I am ready!* Mr Kingston, if you please.”

The organist commences the sweet strains of ‘A Man’s a Man For All That’, and Mei Quong Tart, prominent Sydney businessman and tea importer, philanthropist, cricketer and Freemason, begins the song he learned at the knee of his Scottish guardian on the goldfields:

*“Is there for honest Poverty
That hings his head, an’ all that;
The coward slave – we pass him by,
We dare be poor for all that! ...”*

*“For a’ that, and a’ that,
Their tinsel show, an’ a’ that;
The honest man, tho’ e’er sae poor,
Is king o’ men for a’ that ...”*

As the verses proceed, all of the Scots in the crowd and many of the others join in.

The audience thunders its applause, as Sydneysiders always do when their favourite ‘Chow’, Quong Tart, sings Burns. He bows low and leaves the stage, and Alderman Riley says how wonderful it was and how clean Mr Tart’s tea-shops are, and promises the audience that Mr Tart has agreed to return at midnight to help usher in 1893 with ‘Auld Lang Syne’.

“And Mrs Fenwick,” Alderman Riley adds with a smile and a wink, “although she might not be quite a Miss Melba, might perhaps be persuaded by popular request to lead the customary singing of ‘God Save the Queen’ as she has at every City of Sydney Watch Night since Her Majesty’s Jubilee.”

Outside in George-street, a mob of about a hundred and fifty unemployed men from the Active Service Brigade are loudly singing 'The Marseillaise', vainly trying to drown out Mr Kingston's Handel.

Larry Petrie's hanging on to the iron spear fence with his good arm and thrusting the stump of his other into the air with every chorus of "To arms, citizens!", as he always does, and the men are laughing. They always love it when the handsome Yank does that lark.

About a mile north at 138 Phillip-street, down towards the docks of Circular Quay, Louisa Lawson sleeps the sleep of the weary after a night of setting eight-point Times Roman. (This was years before whenever it was that Louisa and her son Henry drove each other crazy. Or, not to ascribe blame, before they each went mad of their own accord.)

A few hundred miles north-west as the crow flies (backwards, to keep the sand out of his eyes), the red in the campfire embers is fading and there's not much sound but for a legion of mosquitoes and the tired "chirk-chirk" of a Moth owl. The two young men are almost as buggered from searching in the dark for dry dung, as from tramping the desert all day in 110 degrees.

What is it that makes a man what he is, and what makes a man do what he does? This is what has been troubling Henry Lawson all day, and he's tried to raise it with his mate but there's been little interest there, and the matter remains unsolved and bothersome. Henry would feel a great deal better if there were some other people out here in the Never Never. Then he could think about them, and talk and listen to them and write about them, instead of going all tanglefoot over these blasted questions burning in his head. It's good to have Jimmy Gordon with him, but it isn't enough.

A shooting star crosses the Milky Way unnoticed, nor would the two blokes care, having seen more than enough shooting stars on hungry, exhausted nights like this. "I don't know about you, young Jim, but I think this is one New Year I won't see in," Henry yawns and rolls over beneath his battered bluey. He tries not to let the rough wool scratch where the skin has come off the bleeding blisters on his swollen feet.

Jim Gordon was almost asleep anyway. “Ahh, what I’d give to be kissing my best donah under a full moon at Bondi Beach, Harry.”

“Half a moon is better than no moon, Jim.” Henry mumbles and stretches. “What I’d give for a cold bottle of colonial, and it could be in Hades or Western Australia for all I care. Or even a threepenny sleever of that sour yeast Lennon sells in the Bourke Great Western would do—”

Jim laughs, “Even some of them weevily ship’s biscuits and little squares of cheese bloody Braithwaite serves up at the Carriers’ Arms! Say, what tucker do we have for tomorrow?”

Silence.

“Are you asleep, Harry?”

“Eh?”

“Are you kipping yet?” Jim Gordon waits for a reply, and it’s a long wait.

“If I was asleep, Jim me lad, would I be maggin’ to you?”

Jim always forgets how deaf Harry is, but he’s getting the notion of it. He speaks up.

“Do we have any tucker for tomorrow?” Again, he waits.

“Three johnny cakes. And not just for tomorrow.” Henry’s slurred voice is the voice of a man who wants to make himself as sleepy as he was a minute ago, before food was mentioned.

“How many days to Hungerford, Harry?”

Sigh. “At the rate you walk, Gordon, about 365. Or 366. Is it a leap year tomorrow?”

“Tell me dinkum, Harry.”

“I reckon about seven. Seven if we’re lucky and if you can keep up with me. That’s why they call it Hungerford. G’night mate.”

“G’night cobber. Happy New Year.”

Henry finds it hot under the blanket and squirms his six-foot, lean body to let in some air. He thinks the talk of tucker will keep him awake, and if not that, the mosquitoes will, or the dung smoke which has failed to stop them, but the tramp-weariness wins out soon enough.

It seems like not a moment’s passed when the heat that wakes Henry is that of dawn as the sun slants through the she-oaks by the Warrego River. “Another blanky scorcher, I’ll be bound,” he thinks.

Water’s not short at this camp even if the Warrego is just a trickle of bad milk and mozzie wrigglers, and before long Jim has a billy boiling and Henry’s divvied up a johnny cake. At the Oomobah woolshed there had been no work, but a hungry shearer named Expectation had given them a mud map, so this Warrego slop in their waterbags only has to last as far as Mother Nosey’s Spring, or at worst Lake Eliza.

“You seem a bit sulky, Jim me lad.” At all of 25 years of age, and as famous as any man in Australia, he can call a man of eighteen “lad” and he knows Jimmy won’t mind. “Why’s that? Do you reckon 1893’s going to be as crook as ’92?”

“It’s not that, Harry. I was thinking about De Guinney. Maybe he didn’t mean it.”

“Maybe he didn’t. And maybe he’s not a lousy idling waster of a Russian blanky nihilist with a warped sense of humour ... and socks that smell like a council tip ... to boot. Good riddance to bad rubbish.” Henry Lawson flicks a stick back into the smouldering fire, wipes grey ash from his hand onto his trousers, and chuckles.

“Maybe,” says Jim with half a smile.

An hour or two down the road and it’s over 85. “She’ll hit the century for sure,” says Jim.

“Again,” Henry Lawson says as dry as chaff. He’s tramped a lot of scorchers since this damn bush caper began in September. “We’d best be careful. The postmaster at The Port o’ Bourke told me January’s the wettest month out here, and last year he reckons ‘a sandfly nearly got drowned’.” Harry likes saying “The Port of Bourke”, the official name of that desert town a million miles from any ocean. Some Port of Bourkians, though, weren’t quite so fond of the way he used to say it.

“It’s New Year’s Day. I forgot,” Jim says.

“Yep. So we’ve done five days. We left The Port o’ Bourke day after Boxing Day.” They lug their swags another hundred yards north. Jim starts laughing.

“That was a grand prank on Christmas Eve, Harry.”

Henry starts laughing too. “The look on that barmaid’s leather face would bring tears to a glass eyeball!”

“You know what her look was like, mate?” Jim asks.

“Eh?”

“You know what Peggy’s face looked like? When you said the copper was comin’?”

“Go on.”

“Like the look on yours yesty when you saw that carpet snake in the tank at Kelly’s Camp Bore!” Jim almost loses his swag from laughing. Now Henry’s laughing too. It’s too much for Jim and he slows down and doubles over giggling like a loon but Henry keeps walking on in the dusty red sand with that determined pace of his. That grim, relentless pace which only yesterday, after Henry ditched the Russian, Jim had told Harry reminded him of ‘Faces in the Street’.

*Grinding body, grinding soul,
Yielding scarce enough to eat —
Oh! I sorrow for the owners of the faces in the street.*

It was one of the first Henry Lawsons he had read as a boy. Henry's walking but Jim's had to stay where he was, to laugh, slap his thighs and sling his swag over the other sweaty shoulder. The hot air reminds Henry of when he's stood too close to the furnace when he toiled at Hudson Bros, and the ground is already burning through the leather soles of his ancient bluchers, almost too hot to step where there is no shade – and there's been precious little shade since Watty's pub.

"I really don't think ..." Jim laughs, "I really don't think the Russian knew the Joe Blake was in there when he passed you the pannikin at Kelly's Bore. And then, when you drank from it —"

Lawson turns round, grinning from ear to ear, then changes it to a fake schoolmaster face and pretends to explode. "Didn't know that bloomin' snake was in the flamin' tank??!! The adjectival thing was eight foot long if it was an inch, as bloated as Mabel Flannery, ya blanky idjut ... and floating like ... like a *blanky prune in a rice blanky pudding!*"

"Well, he might not have known it was dead!"

"Didn't know it was dead? That carpet snake, young Jim, was as dead as a dodo, and looked it. Dead! It had thrown in the towel – he'd skied the rag, old son. He had tossed in the alley. He was a Rookwood ratepayer. He'd called it quits!"

He picks up a pebble, throws it hard as a man can at Gordon's feet and the boy would jump higher if he wasn't cackling so hard, and the swag weren't so heavy.

"He had taken the count. He'd done his dash. He'd done the float! He'd croaked, snuffed it and kicked the bucket. Gone to snake Valhalla. That python had skied the wipe, old mate. *He had passed in his blooming cheque!*" Henry knows he'd better be careful. Jim's a lanky streak of nothing, but he's strong and fit as a Mallee bull and when he skylarks he's been known to hold a big man by his ankles above a creek. All in jest, mind you, but he could give Henry a shellacking if he had a mind to.

"I was bullin' you last night young fella-me-lad, out of the goodness of me soft heart, to spare you. It's another *nine* days to Hungerford, and not a day less. Put *that* in yer pipe and smoke it!" The two men walk the

track laughing like schoolboys, Mr Henry Lawson in front, and the fair-haired lad behind. Somehow they've helped bring Hungerford about a hundred-and-fifty yards closer. That's important in January, when it's all flies by day, mozzies by night, and the sun would char the bones of the dead in their graves.

"You know, I liked that Frenchy Hoffmeister," Jim says, changing the subject. "I wouldn't have minded trav'lin' with Frenchy for a few more miles."

"Another flamin' nihilist."

"Go and chase yourself! He said he was an anarchist."

"Well that's all right then," says Henry.

"Anyway, he had some good yarns. Wasn't he lucky to hear about that one shearin' job at – look Harry! On the horizon. Afghans. Five or six camels."

"It'll be brumbies, mate. Or a willy-willy. Or the ghost of Cap'n Starlight."

"No, look, mate!"

"I hate camels. They remind me of iguanas. And albatrosses. And I don't much care for horizons any more."

"Albatrosses?"

"And you reckon you were born under a tilted cart. Are you sure it wasn't a tilted bullock? Don't you ever read anything intelligent, Gordon?"

"No, only *The Bulletin*, Harry."

Henry turns around grinning and makes as if to pick up another stone from the red sand. "You cheeky – don't chiack me, young fella-me-lad or next time I won't miss. Stewth! What's that? Jeez, I thought it was a snake!"

“Nothin’. A Prickly gecko, mate. He dropped off your shiralee.”

“A Prickly gecko? I’m not surprised, given the conditions he has to live under. I’m a bit out of sorts meself,” Henry says, kicking the lizard aside.

Henry swaps shoulders and they tramp in silence for another mile or two squinting beneath the outback sky, concentrating on the track ahead and the straps cutting into their meat.

There’s an old story about two swaggies setting out from camp one morning. Jack says “Is that a jumbuck on that hill over there?” Later that night Bill is kicking off his boots for bed and says, “Nope. A ewe.” Next morning Bill wakes to find his mate gone, and a note: “IM CLEARIN OUT. TOO MUCH MAGGIN IN THIS HERE CAMP.”

These are not the Jack and Bill kind of swaggie. Jim and Henry enjoy talking and yarning, mostly when they’ve stopped for a spell, although never when tramping uphill, which you couldn’t say has happened much these past few months and these hundreds of miles. They talk too much, some say. That publican they’d been painting cottages for back in The Port almost sacked them because it was “a place of employment, not a damned School of Arts”. But soon Jim hears a Henry silence, that particular silence he’d heard once or twice on the Warrego tramp in December, as they made their way to rouseabout – mainly pickers-up – at Toorale, Sam McCaughey’s 46-stand shed. Henry had said, “Half a million bloomin’ acres. A quarter of a million blanky sheep shorn a year, and they can’t keep on two blokes. It’s not because we’re union, mate. It’s because we’re newchums. Something’s gone bung with this country.”

“Things are crook in Muswellbrook, all right,” young Jim had said. Then there had been that deep, impenetrable infinity of silence.

Jim Gordon remembers how on that road near Gumbalie Harry had really had the morbids, and it seemed the only thing that ever broke the monotony was William Doyle’s Royal Mail (“the Doyal Mail”, Harry used to call it) en route to Wanaaring. There was a passenger on that Cobb & Co. one black night, a bush socialist who recognised “the pote” Henry Lawson by coachlight, from his “pitchers in the *Bully*” and “your

prominent moustachio that looks like an advertisement for Barry's Tricopherous for the Hair". He paid Henry half a crown to recite "a pome" and got 'Flag of the Southern Cross' for his coins. "Obviously not a Sydney socialist," Harry said later. "Firstly, I didn't know him. Secondly, he had half a caser."

Even out on the wallaby, with Jim's blisters giving birth to blisters, he loves it when Harry breaks that melancholic hush with a verse, a new verse ... a *Bulletin* verse. When he was with him in October on that "Mud Turtle" riverboat on the Darling, somewhere out near Louth, Jim'd been first to hear 'When Your Pants Begin to Go', before anyone read it in the sticks or even the Big Smoke. Henry wrote that thing in his head even with the whoops of fifty drunken shearers rushing around his lugs for about a hundred miles.

"Are you versifyin', Harry?"

"Eh?"

"Are you versifying? How do you do it in your garret like that?"

"You try balancing an ink pot when you're tramping the wallaby, or picking up wool, or house-painting, or holding a cold lager, old son."

"Is that how Banjo composes? He wouldn't have to, I suppose, in his office," Jim says.

"We're not talking about The Banjo today."

"I thought you were mates. OK. Recite it, will you?" Jim begs. "If you have a new one."

"I do happen to have a new pome." Henry draws breath.

*"The old year went, and the new returned, in the withering weeks of drought,
The cheque was spent that the shearer earned, and the sheds were all cut out;
The publican's words were short and few, and the publican's looks were black –*

And the time had come, as the shearer knew, to carry his swag Out Back.

*“For time means tucker, and tramp you must, where the scrubs and plains are wide,
With seldom a track that a man can trust, or a mountain peak to guide;
All day long in the dust and heat – when Summer is on the track –
With stinted stomachs and blistered feet, they carry their swags Out Back.”*

“That’s a bottler, Harry. I don’t know how you do that. What do you call it?”

Henry thinks for a moment. “I call it a deener, Jimmy. A deener. Otherwise a bob, or four treys. Otherwise two zacks. I call it a shilling. But I’ll make it a quid by dark.” And on they tramp.

Now, I suppose while the bard and his acolyte are tramping, it would be as well to tell you how and why Henry Lawson happens to be out here hoofing the wallaby.

Well, you see, Mr Archibald had given him five pounds and a railway ticket to Bourke. One way. Now, that sounds more like a punishment than a gratuity, but at the time Henry thought it seemed a good idea and fivers never were something to sneeze at. Look at it this way, he’d only ever got two quid a week on staff at the *Boomerang* up in Brisbane.

For sure, five quid was a lot of money to anyone, not just Henry Lawson. Why, if he had a mind to, he could buy three bottles of Hennessy’s Three Star Brandy for a quid and still buy lunch and a haircut. Goodness me, Harry in his best Sydney days got two weeks’ lodging for only a sovereign – and not one of his Castlereagh-street dosshouses, I mean something almost posh, when he was flush from selling a pome or two. In Harry’s ‘Roaring Days’, you might say.

But of course, there was more of a yarn and more of a reason than just Archy’s largesse that might explain Henry’s fortnight tramp to Hungerford and the fortnight tramp coming back.