# Black Joe

Henry Lawson

They called him Black Joe, and me White Joe, by way of distinction and for the convenience of his boss (my uncle), and my aunt, and mother; so, when we heard the cry of "Bla-a-ack Joe!" (the adjective drawn out until it became a screech, after several repetitions, and the "Joe" short and sharp) coming across the flat in a woman's voice, Joe knew that the missus wanted him at the house, to get wood or water, or mind the baby, and he kept carefully out of sight; he went at once when uncle called. And when we heard the cry of "Wh-i-i-te Joe!" which we did with difficulty and after several tries—though Black Joe's ears were of the keenest—we knew that I was overdue at home, or absent without leave, and was probably in for a warming, as the old folk called it. On some occasions I postponed the warming as long as my stomach held out, which was a good while in five-corner, native-cherry, or yam season—but the warming was none the cooler for being postponed.

Sometimes Joe heard the wrong adjective, or led me to believe he did— and left me for a whole afternoon under the impression that the race of Ham was in demand at the homestead, when I myself was wanted there, and maternal wrath was increasing every moment of my absence.

But Joe knew that my conscience was not so elastic as his, and—well, you must expect little things like this in all friendships.

Black Joe was somewhere between nine and twelve when I first met him, on a visit to my uncle's station; I was somewhere in those years too. He was very black, the darker for being engaged in the interesting but uncertain occupation of "burning off" in his spare time— which wasn't particularly limited. He combined shepherding, 'possum and kangaroo hunting, crawfishing, sleeping, and various other occupations and engagements with that of burning off. I was very white, being a sickly town boy; but, as I took great interest in burning off, and was not particularly fond of cold water —it was in winter time—the difference in our complexions was not so marked at times.

Black Joe's father, old Black Jimmie, lived in a gunyah on the rise at the back of the sheepyards, and shepherded for my uncle. He was a gentle, good-humoured, easy-going old fellow with a pleasant smile; which description applies, I think, to most old blackfellows in civilisation. I was very partial to the old man, and chummy with him, and used to slip away from the homestead whenever I could, and squat by the campfire along with the other piccaninnies, and think, and yarn socially with Black Jimmie by the hour. I would give something to remember those conversations now. Sometimes somebody would be sent to bring me home, when it got too late, and Black Jimmie would say:

“Piccaninnie alonga possum rug,” and there I’d be, sound asleep, with the other young Australians.

I liked Black Jimmie very much, and would willingly have adopted him as a father. I should have been quite content to spend my days in the scrub, enjoying life in dark and savage ways, and my nights “alonga possum rug”; but the family had other plans for my future.

It was a case of two blackfellows and one gin, when Black Jimmie went a-wooing —about twelve years before I made his acquaintance—and he fought for his bride in the black fashion. It was the last affair of that kind in the district. My uncle’s brother professed to have been present at the fight, and gave me an alleged description of it. He said that they drew lots, and Black Jimmie put his hands on his knees and bent his head, and the other blackfellow hit him a whack on the skull with a nulla nulla. Then they had a nip of rum all round— Black Jimmie must have wanted it, for the nulla nulla was knotted, and heavy, and made in the most approved fashion. Then the other blackfellow bent his head, and Jimmie took the club and returned the whack with interest. Then the other fellow hit Jimmie a lick, and took a clout in return. Then they had another drink, and continued thus until Jimmie’s rival lost all heart and interest in the business. But you couldn’t take everything my uncle’s brother said for granted.

Black Mary was a queen by right, and had the reputation of being the cleanest gin in the district; she was a great favourite with the squatters’ wives round there. Perhaps she hoped to reclaim Jimmie—he was royal, too, but held easy views with regard to religion and the conventionalities of civilisation. Mary insisted on being married properly by a clergyman, made the old man build a decent hut, had all her children christened, and kept him and them clean and tidy up to the time of her death.

Poor Queen Mary was ambitious. She started to educate her children, and when they got beyond her—that is when they had learnt their letters— she was grateful for any assistance from the good-natured bush men and women of her acquaintance. She had decided to get her eldest boy into the mounted police, and had plans for the rest, and she worked hard for them, too. Jimmie offered no opposition, and gave her no assistance beyond the rations and money he earned shepherding —which was as much as could be expected of him.

He did as many husbands do “for the sake of peace and quietness”— he drifted along in the wake of his wife, and took things as easily as her schemes of reformation and education would allow him to.

Queen Mary died before her time, respected by all who knew or had heard of her. The nearest squatter’s wife sent a pair of sheets for a shroud, with instructions to lay Mary out, and arranged (by bush telegraph) to drive over next morning with her sister-in-law and two other white women in the vicinity, to see Mary decently buried.

But the remnant of Jimmie's tribe were there beforehand. They tore the sheets in strips and tied Mary up in a bundle, with her chin to her knees—preparing her for burial in their own fashion— and mourned all night in whitewash and ashes. At least, the gins did. The white women saw that it was hopeless to attempt to untie any of the innumerable knots and double knots, even if it had been possible to lay Mary out afterwards; so they had to let her be buried as she was, with black and white obsequies. And we've got no interest in believing that she did not "jump up white woman" long ago.

My uncle and his brother took the two eldest boys. Black Jimmie shifted away from the hut at once with the rest of his family —for the "devil-devil" sat down there—and Mary's name was strictly "tabooed" in accordance with aboriginal etiquette.

Jimmie drifted back towards the graves of his fathers in company with a decreasing flock of sheep day by day (for the house of my uncle had fallen on times of drought and depression, and foot-rot and wool rings, and over-drafts and bank owners), and a few strips of bark, a dying fire, a black pipe, some greasy 'possum rugs and blankets, a litter of kangaroo tails, etc., four neglected piccaninnies, half a score of mangy mongrels, and, haply, a "lilly drap o' rum", by night.

The four little Australians grew dirtier and more shy and savage, and ate underdone kangaroo and 'possum and native bear, with an occasional treat of oak grubs and goanna by preference— and died out, one by one, as blacks do when brought within the ever widening circle of civilisation. Jimmie moved promptly after each death, and left the evil one in possession, and built another mia-mia—each one being less pretentious than the last. Finally he was left, the last of his tribe, to mourn his lot in solitude.

But the devil-devil came and sat down by King Jimmie's side one night, so he, too, moved out across the Old Man border, and the mia-mia rotted into the ground and the grass grew there.

I admired Joe; I thought him wiser and cleverer than any white boy in the world. He could smell out 'possums unerringly, and I firmly believed he could see yards through the muddiest of dam water; for once, when I dropped my boat in, and was not sure of the spot, he fished it out first try. With cotton reels and bits of stick and bark he would make the model of a station homestead, slaughter-yards, sheep-yards, and all complete, working in ideas and improvements of his own which might have been put into practice with advantage. He was a most original and interesting liar upon all subjects upon which he was ignorant and which came up incidentally. He gave me a very interesting account of an interview between his father and Queen Victoria, and mentioned casually that his father

had walked across the Thames without getting wet.

He also told me how he, Joe, had tied a mounted trooper to a verandah post and thrashed him with pine saplings until the timber gave out and he was tired. I questioned Jimmie, but the incidents seemed to have escaped the old king's memory.

Joe could build bigger woodheaps with less wood than any black or white tramp or loafer round there. He was a born architect. He took a world of pains with his wood-heaps—he built them hollow, in the shape of a break-wind, with the convex side towards the house for the benefit of his employers. Joe was easy-going; he had inherited a love of peace and quietness from his father. Uncle generally came home after dark, and Joe would have little fires lit at safe distances all round the house, in order to convey an impression that the burning off was proceeding satisfactorily.

When the warm weather came, Joe and I got into trouble with an old hag for bathing in a waterhole in the creek in front of her shanty, and she impounded portions of our wardrobe. We shouldn't have lost much if she had taken it all; but our sense of injury was deep, especially as she used very bad grammar towards us.

Joe addressed her from the safe side of the water. He said, "Look here! Old leather-face, sugar-eye, plar-bag marmy, I call it you."

"Plar-bag marmy" meant "Mother Flour-bag", and ration sugar was decidedly muddy in appearance.

She came round the waterhole with a clothes prop, and made good time, too; but we got across and away with our clothes.

That little incident might have changed the whole course of my existence. Plar-bag Marmy made a formal complaint to uncle, who happened to pass there on horseback about an hour later; and the same evening Joe's latest and most carefully planned wood heap collapsed while aunt was pulling a stick out of it in the dark, and it gave her a bad scare, the results of which might have been serious.

So uncle gave us a thrashing, without the slightest regard for racial distinctions, and sent us to bed without our suppers.

We sought Jimmie's camp, but Joe got neither sympathy nor damper from his father, and I was sent home with a fatherly lecture "for going alonga that fella," meaning Joe.

Joe and I discussed existence at a waterhole down the creek next afternoon, over a billy of crawfish which we had boiled and a piece of gritty damper, and decided to retire beyond the

settled districts—some five hundred miles or so—to a place that Joe said he knew of, where there were lagoons and billabongs ten miles wide, alive with ducks and fish, and black cockatoos and kangaroos and wombats, that only waited to be knocked over with a stick.

I thought I might as well start and be a blackfellow at once, so we got a rusty pan without a handle, and cooked about a pint of fat yellow oak-grubs; and I was about to fall to when we were discovered, and the full weight of combined family influence was brought to bear on the situation. We had broken a new pair of shears digging out those grubs from under the bark of the she-oaks, and had each taken a blade as his own especial property, which we thought was the best thing to do under the circumstances. Uncle wanted those shears badly, so he received us with the buggy whip—and he didn't draw the colour line either. All that night and next day I wished he had. I was sent home, and Joe went droving with uncle soon after that, else I might have lived a life of freedom and content and died out peacefully with the last of my adopted tribe.

Joe died of consumption on the track. When he was dying uncle asked: "Is there anything you would like?"

And Joe said: "I'd like a lilly drap o' rum, boss."

Which were his last words, for he drank the rum and died peacefully.

I was the first to hear the news at home, and, being still a youngster, I ran to the house, crying "Oh, mother! aunt's Joe is dead!"

There were visitors at our place at the time, and, as the eldest child of the maternal aunt in question had also been christened Joe —after a grandfather of our tribe (my tribe, not Black Joe's)— the news caused a sudden and unpleasant sensation. But cross-examination explained the mistake, and I retired to the rear of the pig-sty, as was my custom when things went wrong, with another cause for grief.