Going Blind

Henry Lawson

I met him in the Full-and-Plenty Dining-rooms. It was a cheap place in the city, with good beds upstairs let at one shilling per night—"Board and residence for respectable single men, fifteen shillings per week." I was a respectable single man then. I boarded and resided there. I boarded at a greasy little table in the greasy little corner under the fluffy little staircase in the hot and greasy little dining-room or restaurant downstairs. They called it dining-rooms, but it was only one room, and there wasn't half enough room in it to work your elbows when the seven little tables and forty-nine chairs were occupied. There was not room for an ordinary-sized steward to pass up and down between the tables; but our waiter was not an ordinarysized man—he was a living skeleton in miniature. We handed the soup, and the "roast beef one," and "roast lamb one," "corn beef and cabbage one," "veal and stuffing one," and the "veal and pickled pork," one or two, or three, as the case might be—and the tea and coffee, and the various kinds of puddings —we handed them over each other, and dodged the drops as well as we could. The very hot and very greasy little kitchen was adjacent, and it contained the bathroom and other conveniences, behind screens of whitewashed boards.

I resided upstairs in a room where there were five beds and one wash-stand; one candle-stick, with a very short bit of soft yellow candle in it; the back of a hair-brush, with about a dozen bristles in it; and half a comb—the big-tooth end—with nine and a half teeth at irregular distances apart.

He was a typical bushman, not one of those tall, straight, wiry, brown men of the West, but from the old Selection Districts, where many drovers came from, and of the old bush school; one of those slight active little fellows whom we used to see in cabbage-tree hats, Crimean shirts, strapped trousers, and elastic-side boots—"larstins," they called them. They could dance well; sing indifferently, and mostly through their noses, the old bush songs; play the concertina horribly; and ride like—like—well, they *could* ride.

He seemed as if he had forgotten to grow old and die out with this old colonial school to which he belonged. They had careless and forgetful ways about them. His name was Jack Gunther, he said, and he'd come to Sydney to try to get something done to his eyes. He had a portmanteau, a carpet bag, some things in a three-bushel bag, and a tin box. I sat beside him on his bed, and struck up an acquaintance, and he told me all about it. First he asked me would I mind shifting round to the other side, as he was rather deaf in that ear. He'd been kicked by a horse, he said, and had been a little dull o' hearing on that side ever since.

He was as good as blind. "I can see the people near me," he said, "but I can't make out their faces. I can just make out the pavement and the houses close at hand, and all the rest is a sort of

white blur." He looked up: "That ceiling is a kind of white, ain't it? And this," tapping the wall and putting his nose close to it, "is a sort of green, ain't it?" The ceiling might have been whiter. The prevalent tints of the wall-paper had originally been blue and red, but it was mostly green enough now—a damp, rotten green; but I was ready to swear that the ceiling was snow and that the walls were as green as grass if it would have made him feel more comfortable. His sight began to get bad about six years before, he said; he didn't take much notice of it at first, and then he saw a quack, who made his eyes worse. He had already the manner of the blind—the touch of every finger, and even the gentleness in his speech. He had a boy down with him—a "sorter cousin of his," and the boy saw him round. "I'll have to be sending that youngster back," he said, "I think I'll send him home next week. He'll be picking up and learning too much down here."

I happened to know the district he came from, and we would sit by the hour and talk about the country, and chaps by the name of this and chaps by the name of that—drovers mostly, whom we had met or had heard of. He asked me if I'd ever heard of a chap by the name of Joe Scott—a big sandy-complexioned chap, who might be droving; he was his brother, or, at least, his half-brother, but he hadn't heard of him for years; he'd last heard of him at Blackall, in Queensland; he might have gone overland to Western Australia with Tyson's cattle to the new country.

We talked about grubbing and fencing and digging and droving and shearing—all about the bush—and it all came back to me as we talked. "I can see it all now," he said once, in an abstracted tone, seeming to fix his helpless eyes on the wall opposite. But he didn't see the dirty blind wall, nor the dingy window, nor the skimpy little bed, nor the greasy wash-stand he saw the dark blue ridges in the sunlight, the grassy sidlings and flats, the creek with clumps of she-oak here and there, the course of the willow-fringed river below, the distant peaks and ranges fading away into a lighter azure, the granite ridge in the middle distance, and the rocky rises, the stringy-bark and the apple-tree flats, the scrubs, and the sunlit plains—and all. I could see it, too—plainer than ever I did.

He had done a bit of fencing in his time, and we got talking about timber. He didn't believe in having fencing-posts with big butts; he reckoned it was a mistake. "You see," he said, "the top of the butt catches the rain water and makes the post rot quicker. I'd back posts without any butt at all to last as long or longer than posts with 'em—that's if the fence is well put up and well rammed." He had supplied fencing stuff, and fenced by contract, and—well, you can get more posts without butts out of a tree than posts with them. He also objected to charring the butts. He said it only made more work—and wasted time—the butts lasted longer without being charred.

I asked him if he'd ever got stringy-bark palings or shingles out of mountain ash, and he smiled a smile that did my heart good to see, and said he had. He had also got them out of various other kinds of trees.

We talked about soil and grass, and gold-digging, and many other things which came back to one like a revelation as we yarned.

He had been to the hospital several times. “The doctors don’t say they can cure me,” he said, “they say they might be able to improve my sight and hearing, but it would take a long time —anyway, the treatment would improve my general health. They know what’s the matter with my eyes,” and he explained it as well as he could. “I wish I’d seen a good doctor when my eyes first began to get weak; but young chaps are always careless over things. It’s harder to get cured of anything when you’re done growing.”

He was always hopeful and cheerful. “If the worst comes to the worst,” he said, “there’s things I can do where I come from. I might do a bit o’ wool-sorting, for instance. I’m a pretty fair expert. Or else when they’re weeding out I could help. I’d just have to sit down and they’d bring the sheep to me, and I’d feel the wool and tell them what it was—being blind improves the feeling, you know.”

He had a packet of portraits, but he couldn’t make them out very well now. They were sort of blurred to him, but I described them and he told me who they were. “That’s a girl o’ mine,” he said, with reference to one—a jolly, good-looking bush girl. “I got a letter from her yesterday. I managed to scribble something, but I’ll get you, if you don’t mind, to write something more I want to put in on another piece of paper, and address an envelope for me.”

Darkness fell quickly upon him now—or, rather, the “sort of white blur” increased and closed in. But his hearing was better, he said, and he was glad of that and still cheerful. I thought it natural that his hearing should improve as he went blind.

One day he said that he did not think he would bother going to the hospital any more. He reckoned he’d get back to where he was known. He’d stayed down too long already, and the “stuff” wouldn’t stand it. He was expecting a letter that didn’t come. I was away for a couple of days, and when I came back he had been shifted out of the room and had a bed in an angle of the landing on top of the staircase, with the people brushing against him and stumbling over his things all day on their way up and down. I felt indignant, thinking that—the house being full—the boss had taken advantage of the bushman’s helplessness and good nature to put him there. But he said that he was quite comfortable. “I can get a whiff of air here,” he said.

Going in next day I thought for a moment that I had dropped suddenly back into the past and into a bush dance, for there was a concertina going upstairs. He was sitting on the bed, with his legs crossed, and a new cheap concertina on his knee, and his eyes turned to the patch of ceiling as if it were a piece of music and he could read it. “I’m trying to knock a few

tunes into my head," he said, with a brave smile, "in case the worst comes to the worst." he tried to be cheerful, but seemed worried and anxious. The letter hadn't come. I thought of the many blind musicians in Sydney, and I thought of the bushman's chance, standing at a corner swanking a cheap concertina, and I felt sorry for him.

I went out with a vague idea of seeing someone about the matter, and getting something done for the bushman—of bringing a little influence to his assistance; but I suddenly remembered that my clothes were worn out, my hat in a shocking state, my boots burst, and that I owed for a week's board and lodging, and was likely to be thrown out at any moment myself; and so I was not in a position to go where there was influence.

When I went back to the restaurant there was a long, gaunt, sandy-complexioned bushman sitting by Jack's side. Jack introduced him as his brother, who had returned unexpectedly to his native district, and had followed him to Sydney. The brother was rather short with me at first, and seemed to regard the restaurant people—all of us, in fact—in the light of spiders who wouldn't hesitate to take advantage of Jack's blindness if he left him a moment; and he looked ready to knock down the first man who stumbled against Jack, or over his luggage-but that soon wore off. Jack was going to stay with Joe at the Coffee Palace for a few weeks, and then go back up-country, he told me. He was excited and happy. His brother's manner towards him was as if Jack had just lost his wife, or boy, or someone very dear to him. He would not allow him to do anything for himself, nor try to—not even lace up his boots. He seemed to think that he was thoroughly helpless, and when I saw him pack up Jack's things, and help him at the table, and fix his tie and collar with his great brown hands, which trembled all the time with grief and gentleness, and make Jack sit down on the bed whilst he got a cab and carried the traps down to it, and take him downstairs as if he were made of thin glass, and settle with the landlord—then I knew that Jack was all right.

We had a drink together—Joe, Jack, the cabman, and I. Joe was very careful to hand Jack the glass, and Jack made a joke about it for Joe's benefit. He swore he could see a glass yet, and Joe laughed, but looked extra troubled the next moment.

I felt their grips on my hand for five minutes after we parted.