

# He'd Come Back

Henry Lawson

The yarn was all lies, I suppose; but it wasn't bad. A city bushman told it, of course, and he told it in the travellers' hut.

"As true's God hears me I never meant to desert her in cold blood," he said. "We'd only been married about two years, and we'd got along grand together; but times was hard, and I had to jump at the first chance of a job, and leave her with her people, an' go up-country."

He paused and fumbled with his pipe until all ears were brought to bear on him.

"She was a beauty, and no mistake; she was far too good for me—I often wondered how she came to have a chap like me."

He paused again, and the others thought over it—and wondered too, perhaps. The joker opened his lips to speak, but altered his mind about it.

"Well, I travelled up into Queensland, and worked back into Victoria 'n' South Australia, an' I wrote home pretty reg'lar and sent what money I could. Last I got down on to the southwestern coast of South Australia—an' there I got mixed up with another woman—you know what that means, boys?"

Sympathetic silence.

"Well, this went on for two years, and then the other woman drove me to drink. You know what a woman can do when the devil's in her?"

Sound between a sigh and a groan from Lally Thompson. "My oath," he said, sadly.

"You should have made it three years, Jack," interposed the joker; "you said two years before." But he was suppressed.

"Well, I got free of them both, at last—drink and the woman, I mean; but it took another—it took a couple of years to pull myself straight——"

Here the joker opened his mouth again, but was warmly requested to shut it.

"Then, chaps, I got thinking. My conscience began to hurt me, and—and hurt worse every day. It nearly drove me to drink again. Ah, boys, a man—if he is a man—can't expect to wrong a woman

and escape scot-free in the end.” (Sigh from Lally Thompson.) “It’s the one thing that always comes home to a man, sooner or later—you know what that means, boys.”

Lally Thompson: “My oath!”

The joker: “Dry up yer crimson oath! What do you know about women?”

Cries of “Order!”

“Well,” continued the story-teller, “I got thinking. I heard that my wife had broken her heart when I left her, and that made matters worse. I began to feel very bad about it. I felt mean. I felt disgusted with myself. I pictured my poor, illtreated, little wife and children in misery and poverty, and my conscience wouldn’t let me rest night or day”—(Lally Thompson seemed greatly moved)—“so at last I made up my mind to be a man, and make—what’s the word?”

“Reparation,” suggested the joker.

“Yes, so I slaved like a nigger for a year or so, got a few pounds together and went to find my wife. I found out that she was living in a cottage in Burwood, Sydney, and struggling through the winter on what she’d saved from the money her father left her.

“I got a shave and dressed up quiet and decent. I was older looking and more subdued like, and I’d got pretty grey in those few years that I’d been making a fool of myself; and, somehow, I felt rather glad about it, because I reckoned she’d notice it first thing—she was always quick at noticing things—and forgive me all the quicker. Well, I waylaid the school kids that evening, and found out mine—a little boy and a girl—and fine youngsters they were. The girl took after her mother, and the youngster was the dead spit o’ me. I gave ’em half a crown each and told them to tell their mother that someone would come when the sun went down.”

Bogan Bill nodded approvingly.

“So at sundown I went and knocked at the door. It opened, and there stood my little wife looking prettier than ever—only careworn.”

Long, impressive pause.

“Well, Jack, what did she do?” asked Bogan.

“She didn’t do nothing.”

“Well, Jack, and what did you say?”

Jack sighed and straightened himself up: “She said—she said—‘Well, so you’ve come back.’”

Painful silence.

“Well, Jack, and what did you say?”

“I said yes.”

“Well, and so you had!” said Tom Moonlight.

“It wasn’t that, Tom,” said Jack sadly and wearily—“It was the way she said it!”

Lally Thompson rubbed his eyes: “And what did you do, Jack?” he asked gently.

“I stayed for a year, and then I deserted her again—but I meant it that time.”

“Ah, well! It’s time to turn in.”

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