His Father's Mate

Henry Lawson

It was Golden Gully still, but golden in name only, unless indeed the yellow mullock heaps or the bloom of the wattle-trees on the hillside gave it a claim to the title. But the gold was gone from the gully, and the diggers were gone, too, after the manner of Timon's friends when his wealth deserted him. Golden Gully was a dreary place, dreary even for an abandoned goldfield. The poor, tortured earth, with its wounds all bare, seemed to make a mute appeal to the surrounding bush to come up and hide it, and, as if in answer to its appeal, the shrub and saplings were beginning to close in from the foot of the range. The wilderness was reclaiming its own again.

The two dark, sullen hills that stood on each side were clothed from tip to hollow with dark scrub and scraggy box-trees; but above the highest row of shafts on one side ran a line of wattletrees in full bloom.

The top of the western hill was shaped somewhat like a saddle, and standing high above the eucalypti on the point corresponding with the pommel were three tall pines. These lonely trees, seen for many miles around, had caught the yellow rays of many a setting sun long before the white man wandered over the ranges.

The predominant note of the scene was a painful sense of listening, that never seemed to lose its tension—a listening as though for the sounds of digger life, sounds that had gone and left a void that was accentuated by the signs of a former presence. The main army of diggers had long ago vanished to new rushes, leaving only its stragglers and deserters behind. These were men who were too poor to drag families about, men who were old and feeble, and men who had lost their faith in fortune. They had dropped unnoticed out of the ranks, and remained to scratch out a living among the abandoned claims.

Golden Gully had its little community of fossickers who lived in a clearing called Spencer's Flat on one side and Pounding Flat on the other, but they lent no life to the scene; they only haunted it. A stranger might have thought the field entirely deserted until he came on a coat and a billy at the foot of saplings amongst the holes, and heard, in the shallow ground underneath, the thud of a pick, which told of some fossicker below rooting out what little wash remained.

One afternoon towards Christmas, a windlass was erected over an old shaft of considerable depth at the foot of the gully. A greenhide bucket attached to a rope on the windlass was lying next morning near the mouth of the shaft, and beside it, on a clear-swept patch, was a little mound of cool wet wash-dirt.

A clump of saplings near at hand threw a shade over part of the mullock heap, and in this shade, seated on an old coat, was a small boy of eleven or twelve years, writing on a slate.

He had fair hair, blue eyes, and a thin old-fashioned face—a face that would scarcely alter as he grew to manhood. His costume consisted of a pair of moleskin trousers, a cotton shirt. and one suspender. He held the slate rigidly with a corner of its frame pressed close against his ribs, whilst his head hung to one side, so close to the slate that his straggling hair almost touched it. He was regarding his work fixedly out of the corners of his eyes, whilst he painfully copied down the head line, spelling it in a different way each time. In this laborious task he appeared to be greatly assisted by a tongue that lolled out of the corner of his mouth and made an occasional revolution round it, leaving a circle of temporarily clean face. His small clay-covered toes also entered into the spirit of the thing, and helped him not a little by their energetic wriggling. He paused occasionally to draw the back of his small brown arm across his mouth.

Little Isley Mason, or, as he was called, "His Father's Mate," had always been a favourite with the diggers and fossickers from the days when he used to slip out first thing in the morning and take a run across the frosty flat in his shirt. Long Bob Sawkins would often tell how Isley came home one morning from his run in the long, wet grass as naked as he was born, with the information that he had lost his shirt.

Later on. when most of the diggers had gone, and Isley's mother was dead, he was to be seen about the place with bare, sunbrowned arms and legs, a pick and shovel, and a gold dish about two-thirds of his height in diameter, with which he used to go "a-speckin'" and "fossickin'" amongst the old mullock heaps. Long Bob was Isley's special crony, and he would often go out of his way to lay the boy onter bits o' wash and likely spots, lamely excusing his long yarns with the child by the explanation that it was "amusin' to draw Isley out."

Isley had been sitting writing for some time when a deep voice called out from below:

"Isley!"

"Yes, father."

"Send down the bucket."

"Right."

Isley put down his slate, and going to the shaft dropped the bucket down as far as the slack rope reached; then, placing one hand on the bole of the windlass and holding the other against it underneath, he let it slip round between his palms until the bucket reached

bottom. A sound of shovelling was heard for a few moments. and presently the voice cried, “Wind away, sonny.”

“Thet ain’t half enough,” said the boy, peering down. “Don’t be frightened to pile it in, father. I kin wind up a lot more’n thet.”

A little more scraping, and the boy braced his feet well upon the little mound of clay which he had raised under the handle of the windlass to make up for his deficiency in stature.

“Now then. Isley!”

Isley wound slowly but sturdily, and soon the bucket of “wash” appeared above the surface; then he took it in short lifts and deposited it with the rest of the wash-dirt.

“Isley!” called his father again.

“Yes, father.”

“Have you done that writing lesson yet?”

“Very near.”

“Then send down the slate next time for some sums.”

“All right.”

The boy resumed his seat, fixed the corner of the slate well into his ribs, humped his back, and commenced another wavering line.

Tom Mason was known on the place as a silent, hard worker. he was a man of about sixty, tall, and dark bearded. There was nothing uncommon about his face, except, perhaps, that it had hardened, as the face of a man might harden who had suffered a long succession of griefs and disappointments. He lived in a little hut under a peppermint tree at the far edge of Pounding Flat. His wife had died there about six years before, and though new rushes broke out and he was well able to go, he never left Golden Gully.

Mason was kneeling in front of the “face” digging away by the light of a tallow candle stuck in the side. The floor of the drive was very wet, and his trousers were heavy and cold with clay and water; but the old digger was used to this sort of thing. His pick was not bringing out much to-day, however, for he seemed abstracted and would occasionally pause in his work, while his thoughts wandered far away from the narrow streak of wash-dirt in the “face.”

He was digging out pictures from a past life. They were not pleasant ones, for his face was stony and white in the dim glow of the candle.

Thud, thud, thud—the blows became slower and more irregular as the fossicker's mind wandered off into the past. The sides of the drive seemed to vanish slowly away, and the "face" retreated far out beyond a horizon that was hazy in the glow of the southern ocean. He was standing on the deck of a ship and by his side stood a brother. They were sailing southward to the Land of Promise that was shining there in all its golden glory! The sails pressed forward in the bracing wind, and the clipper ship raced along with its burden of the wildest dreamers ever borne in a vessel's hull! Up over long blue ocean ridges, down into long blue ocean gullies; on to lands so new. and yet so old, where above the sunny glow of the southern skies blazed the shining names of Ballarat! and Bendigo! The deck seemed to lurch, and the fossicker fell forward against the face of the drive. The shock recalled him, and he lifted his pick once more.

But the blows slacken again as another vision rises before him. It is Ballarat now. He is working in a shallow claim at Eureka, his brother by his side. The brother looks pale and ill, for he has been up all night dancing and drinking. Out behind them is the line of blue hills; in front is the famous Bakery Hill, and down to the left Golden Point. Two mounted troopers are riding up over Specimen Hill. What do they want?

They take the brother away, handcuffed. Manslaughter last night. Cause—drink and jealousy.

The vision is gone again. Thud, thud, goes the pick; it counts the years that follow—one, two, three, four, up to twenty, and then it stops for the next scene—a selection on the banks of a bright river in New South Wales. The little homestead is surrounded by vines and fruit-trees. Many swarms of bees work under the shade of the trees, and a crop of wheat is nearly ripe on the hillside.

A man and a boy are engaged in clearing a paddock just below the homestead. They are father and son; the son, a boy of about seventeen, is the image of his father.

Horses' feet again! Here comes Nemesis in mounted troopers' uniform.

The mail was stuck up last night about five miles away, and a refractory passenger shot. The son had been out 'possum shooting' all night with some friends.

The troopers take the son away handcuffed: "Robbery under arms."

The father was taking out a stump when the troopers came. His foot is still resting on the

spade, which is half driven home. He watches the troopers take the boy up to the house, and then, driving the spade to its full depth, he turns up another sod. The troopers reach the door of the homestead; but still he digs steadily, and does not seem to hear his wife's cry of despair. The troopers search the boy's room and bring out some clothing in two bundles; but still the father digs. They have saddled up one of the farm horses and made the boy mount. The father digs. They ride off along the ridge with the boy between them. The father never lifts his eyes; the hole widens round the stump; he digs away till the brave little wife comes and takes him gently by the arm. He half rouses himself and follows her to the house like an obedient dog.

Trial and disgrace follow, and then other misfortunes, pleuro among the cattle, drought, and poverty.

Thud, thud, thud again! But it is not the sound of the fossicker's pick—it is the fall of sods on his wife's coffin.

It is a little bush cemetery, and he stands stonily watching them fill up her grave. She died of a broken heart and shame. "I can't bear disgrace! I can't bear disgrace!" she had moaned all these six weary years—for the poor are often proud.

But *he* lives on, for it takes a lot to break a man's heart. He holds up his head and toils on for the sake of a child that is left, and that child is—Isley.

And now the fossicker seems to see a vision of the future. He seems to be standing somewhere, an old, old man, with a younger one at his side; the younger one has Isley's face. Horses' feet again! Ah, God! Nemesis once more in troopers' uniform!

The fossicker falls on his knees in the mud and clay at the bottom of the drive, and prays Heaven to take his last child ere Nemesis comes for him.

Long Bob Sawkins had been known on the diggings as "Bob the Devil." His profile at least from one side, certainly did recall that of the sarcastic Mephistopheles; but the other side, like his true character, was by no means a devil's. His physiognomy had been much damaged, and one eye removed by the premature explosion of a blast in some old Ballarat mine. The blind eye was covered with a green patch, which gave a sardonic appearance to the remaining features.

He was a stupid, heavy, good-natured Englishman. He stuttered a little, and had a peculiar habit of wedging the monosyllable "why" into his conversation at times when it served no other purpose than to fill up the pauses caused by his stuttering; but this by no means

assisted him in his speech, for he often stuttered over the “why” itself.

The sun was getting low down, and its yellow rays reached far up among the saplings of Golden Gully when Bob appeared coming down by the path that ran under the western hill. He was dressed in the usual costume—cotton shirt, moleskin trousers, faded hat and waistcoat, and blucher boots. He carried a pick over his shoulder. the handle of which was run through the heft of a short shovel that hung down behind, and he had a big dish under his arm. He paused opposite the shaft with the windlass, and hailed the boy in his usual form of salutation.

“Look, see here Isley!”

“What is it, Bob?”

“I seed a young—why—magpie up in the scrub, and yer oughter be able to catch it.”

“Can’t leave the shaft; father’s b’low.”

“How did yer father know there was any—why—wash in the old shaft?”

“Seed old Corney in town Saturday, ’n he said thur was enough to make it worth while bailin’ out. Bin bailin’ all the mornin’.”

Bob came over, and letting his tools down with a clatter he hitched up the knees of his moleskins and sat down on one heel.

“What are yer—why—doin’ on the slate, Isley?” said he, taking out an old clay pipe and lighting it.

“Sums,” said Isley.

Bob puffed away at his pipe a moment.

“ ’Tain’t no use!” he said, sitting down on the clay and drawing his knees up. “Edication’s a failyer.”

“Listen at ’im!” exclaimed the boy. “D ‘yer mean ter say it ain’t no use learnin’ readin’ and writin’ and sums?”

“Isley!”

“Right, father.”

The boy went to the windlass and let the bucket down. Bob offered to help him wind up. but Isley, proud of showing his strength to his friend, insisted on winding by himself.

“You’ll be—why—a strong man some day, Isley,” said Bob, landing the bucket.

“Oh, I could wind up a lot more’n father puts in. Look how I greased the handles! It works like butter now,” and the boy sent the handles spinning round with a jerk to illustrate his meaning.

“Why did they call yer Isley for?” queried Bob, as they resumed their seats. “It ain’t yer real name, is it?”

“No, my name’s Harry. A digger useter say I was a isle in the ocean to father ’n mother, ’n then I was nicknamed Isle, ’n then Isley.”

“You hed a—why—brother once, didn’t yer?”

“Yes, but thet was afore I was borned. He died, at least mother used ter say she didn’t know if he was dead; but father says he’s dead as fur’s he’s concerned.”

“And your father hed a brother, too. Did yer ever—why—hear of him?”

“Yes, I heard father talkin’ about it wonst to mother. I think father’s brother got into some row in a bar where a man was killed.”

“And was yer—why—father—why—fond of him?”

“I heard father say that he was wonst, but thet was all past.”

Bob smoked in silence for a while, and seemed to look at home dark clouds that were drifting along like a funeral out in the west. Presently he said half aloud something that sounded like “All, all—why—past.”

“Eh?” said Isley.

“Oh, it’s—why, why—nothin’,” answered Bob, rousing himself. “Is that a paper in yer father’s coat-pocket, Isley?”

“Yes,” said the boy, taking it out.

Bob took the paper and stared hard at it for a moment or so.

“There’s something about the new goldfields there,” said Bob, putting his finger on a tailor’s advertisement. “I wish you’d—why—read it to me, Isley; I can’t see the small print they uses nowadays.”

“No, thet’s not it,” said the boy, taking the paper, “it’s something about——”

“Isley!”

“’Old on, Bob, father wants me.”

The boy ran to the shaft, rested his hands and forehead against the bole of the windlass, and leant over to hear what his father was saying.

Without a moment’s warning the treacherous bole slipped round; a small body bounded a couple of times against the sides of the shaft and fell at Mason’s feet, where it lay motionless!

“Mason!”

“Ay?”

“Put him in the bucket and lash him to the rope with your belt!”

A few moments, and—

“Now, Bob!”

Bob’s trembling hands would scarcely grasp the handle, but he managed to wind somehow.

Presently the form of the child appeared, motionless and covered with clay and water. Mason was climbing up by the steps in the side of the shaft.

Bob tenderly unlashed the boy and laid him under the saplings on the grass; then he wiped some of the clay and blood away from the child’s forehead, and dashed over him some muddy water.

Presently Isley gave a gasp and opened his eyes.

“Are yer—why—hurt much, Isley?” asked Bob.

“Ba-back’s bruk, Bob!”

“Not so bad as that, old man.”

“Where’s father?”

“Coming up.”

Silence awhile, and then

“Father! father! be quick, father!”

Mason reached the surface and came and knelt by the other side of the boy.

“I’ll, I’ll—why—run fur some brandy,” said Bob.

“No use, Bob,” said Isley. “I’m all bruk up.”

“Don’t yer feel better, sonny?”

“No—I’m—goin’ to—die, Bob.”

“Don’t say it, Isley,” groaned Bob.

A short silence, and then the boy’s body suddenly twisted with pain. But it was soon over. He lay still awhile, and then said quietly:

“Good-bye, Bob!”

Bob made a vain attempt to speak. “Isley!” he said, “——”

The child turned and stretched out his hands to the silent, stony-faced man on the other side.

“Father—father, I’m goin’!”

A shuddering groan broke from Mason’s lips, and then all was quiet.

Bob had taken off his hat to wipe his forehead, and his face, in spite of its disfigurement, was strangely like the face of the stone-like man opposite.

For a moment they looked at one another across the body of the child, and then Bob said quietly:

“He never knowed.”

“What does it matter?” said Mason gruffly; and, taking up the dead child, he walked towards the hut.

It was a very sad little group that gathered outside Mason’s hut next morning. Martin’s wife had been there all the morning cleaning up and doing what she could. One of the women had torn up her husband’s only white shirt for a shroud, and they had made the little body look clean and even beautiful in the wretched little hut.

One after another the fossickers took off their hats and entered, stooping through the low door. Mason sat silently at the foot of the bunk with his head supported by his hand, and watched the men with a strange, abstracted air.

Bob had ransacked the camp in search of some boards for a coffin.

“It will be the last I’ll be able to—why—do for him,” he said.

At last he came to Mrs Martin in despair. That lady took him into the dining-room, and pointed to a large pine table, of which she was very proud.

“Knock that table to pieces,” she said.

Taking off the few things that were lying on it, Bob turned it over and began to knock the top off.

When he had finished the coffin one of the fossicker’s wives said it looked too bare, and she ripped up her black riding-skirt, and made Bob tack the cloth over the coffin.

There was only one vehicle available in the place, and that was Martin’s old dray; so about two o’clock Pat Martin attached his old horse Dublin to the shafts with sundry bits of harness and plenty of old rope, and dragged Dublin, dray and all, across to Mason’s hut.

The little coffin was carried out, and two gin-cases were placed by its side in the dray to serve as seats for Mrs Martin and Mrs Grimshaw, who mounted in tearful silence.

Pat Martin felt for his pipe, but remembered himself and mounted on the shaft. Mason fastened up the door of the hut with a padlock. A couple of blows on one of his sharp points

roused Dublin from his reverie. With a lurch to the right and another to the left he started, and presently the little funeral disappeared down the road that led to the “town” and its cemetery.

About six months afterwards Bob Sawkins went on a short journey, and returned with a tall, bearded young man. He and Bob arrived after dark, and went straight to Mason’s hut. There was a light inside, but when Bob knocked there was no answer.

“Go in; don’t be afraid,” he said to his companion.

The stranger pushed open the creaking door, and stood-bareheaded just inside the doorway.

A billy was boiling unheeded on the fire. Mason sat at the table with his face buried in his arms. “Father!”

There was no answer, but the flickering of the firelight made the stranger think he could detect an impatient shrug in Mason’s shoulders.

For a moment the stranger paused irresolute, and then stepping up to the table he laid his hand on Mason’s arm, and said gently:

“Father! Do you want another mate?”

But the sleeper did not—at least. not in this world.