

Johnson's Antidote

Banjo Paterson

Down along the Snakebite River, where the overlanders camp,
Where the serpents are in millions, all of the most deadly stamp;
Where the station-cook in terror, nearly every time he bakes,
Mixes up among the doughboys half-a-dozen poison-snakes:
Where the wily free-selector walks in armour-plated pants,
And defies the stings of scorpions, and the bites of bull-dog ants:
Where the adder and the viper tear each other by the throat,
There it was that William Johnson sought his snake-bite antidote.

Johnson was a free-selector, and his brain went rather queer,
For the constant sight of serpents filled him with a deadly fear;
So he tramped his free-selection, morning, afternoon, and night,
Seeking for some great specific that would cure the serpent's bite.
Till King Billy, of the Mooki, chieftain of the flour-bag head,
Told him, 'Spos'n snake bite pfeller, pfeller mostly drop down dead;
'Spos'n snake bite old goanna, then you watch a while you see,
'Old goanna cure himself with eating little pfeller tree.'
'That's the cure,' said William Johnson, 'point me out this plant sublime,'
But King Billy, feeling lazy, said he'd go another time.

Thus it came to pass that Johnson, having got the tale by rote,
Followed every stray goanna, seeking for the antidote.

Loafing once beside the river, while he thought his heart would break,
There he saw a big goanna fighting with a tiger-snake,
In and out they rolled and wriggled, bit each other, heart and soul,
Till the valiant old goanna swallowed his opponent whole.
Breathless, Johnson sat and watched him, saw him struggle up the bank,
Saw him nibbling at the branches of some bushes, green and rank;
Saw him, happy and contented, lick his lips, as off he crept,
While the bulging in his stomach showed where his opponent slept.
Then a cheer of exultation burst aloud from Johnson's throat;
'Luck at last,' said he, 'I've struck it! 'tis the famous antidote.'

'Here it is, the Grand Elixir, greatest blessing ever known,
'Twenty thousand men in India die each year of snakes alone.
'Think of all the foreign nations, negro, chow, and blackamoor,
'Saved from sudden expiration, by my wondrous snakebite cure.
'It will bring me fame and fortune! In the happy days to be,
'Men of every clime and nation will be round to gaze on me —

‘Scientific men in thousands, men of mark and men of note,
‘Rushing down the Mooki River, after Johnson’s antidote.
‘It will cure delirium tremens, when the patient’s eyeballs stare
‘At imaginary spiders, snakes which really are not there.
‘When he thinks he sees them wriggle, when he thinks he sees them bloat,
‘It will cure him just to think of Johnson’s Snakebite Antidote.’

Then he rushed to the museum, found a scientific man —
‘Trot me out a deadly serpent, just the deadliest you can;
‘I intend to let him bite me, all the risk I will endure,
‘Just to prove the sterling value of my wondrous snakebite cure.
‘Even though an adder bit me, back to life again I’d float;
‘Snakes are out of date, I tell you, since I’ve found the antidote.’

Said the scientific person, ‘If you really want to die,
‘Go ahead — but, if you’re doubtful, let your sheep-dog have a try.
‘Get a pair of dogs and try it, let the snake give both a nip;
‘Give your dog the snakebite mixture, let the other fellow rip;
‘If he dies and yours survives him, then it proves the thing is good.
‘Will you fetch your dog and try it?’ Johnson rather thought he would.
So he went and fetched his canine, hauled him forward by the throat.

‘Stump, old man,’ says he, ‘we’ll show them we’ve the genuine antidote.’

Both the dogs were duly loaded with the poison-gland’s contents;

Johnson gave his dog the mixture, then sat down to wait events.

‘Mark,’ he said, ‘in twenty minutes Stump’ll be a-rushing round,

‘While the other wretched creature lies a corpse upon the ground.’

But, alas for William Johnson! ere they’d watched a half-hour’s spell

Stumpy was as dead as mutton, t’other dog was live and well.

And the scientific person hurried off with utmost speed,

Tested Johnson’s drug and found it was a deadly poison-weed;

Half a tumbler killed an emu, half a spoonful killed a goat,

All the snakes on earth were harmless to that awful antidote.

Down along the Mooki River, on the overlanders’ camp,

Where the serpents are in millions, all of the most deadly stamp,

Wanders, daily, William Johnson, down among those poisonous hordes,

Shooting every stray goanna, calls them ‘black and yaller frauds’.

And King Billy, of the Mooki, cadging for the cast-off coat,

Somehow seems to dodge the subject of the snake-bite antidote.

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