

# Macquarie's Mate

Henry Lawson

The chaps in the bar of Stiffner's shanty were talking about Macquarie, an absent shearer—who seemed, from their conversation, to be better known than liked by them.

"I ain't seen Macquarie for ever so long," remarked Box-o'-Tricks, after a pause. "Wonder where he could 'a' got to?"

"Jail, p'r'aps—or hell," growled Barcoo. "He ain't much loss, any road."

"My oath, yer right, Barcoo!" interposed "Sally" Thompson. "But, now I come to think of it, Old Awful Example there was a mate of his one time. Bless'd if the old soaker ain't comin' to life again!"

A shaky, rag-and-dirt-covered framework of a big man rose uncertainly from a corner of the room, and, staggering forward, brushed the staring thatch back from his forehead with one hand, reached blindly for the edge of the bar with the other, and drooped heavily.

"Well, Awful Example," demanded the shanty-keeper. "What's up with you now?"

The drunkard lifted his head and glared wildly round with bloodshot eyes.

"Don't you—don't you talk about him! *Drop it*, I say! DROP it!"

"What the devil's the matter with you now, anyway?" growled the barman. "Got 'em again? Hey?"

"Don't you—don't you talk about Macquarie! He's a mate of mine! Here! Gimme a drink!"

"Well, what if he is a mate of yours?" sneered Barcoo. "It don't reflec' much credit on you—nor him neither."

The logic contained in the last three words was unanswerable, and Awful Example was still fairly reasonable, even when rum oozed out of him at every pore. He gripped the edge of the bar with both hands, let his ruined head fall forward until it was on a level with his temporarily rigid arms, and stared blindly at the dirty floor; then he straightened himself up, still keeping his hold on the bar.

"Some of you chaps," he said huskily; "*one* of you chaps, in this bar to-day, called Macquarie a

scoundrel, and a loafer, and a blackguard, and—and a sneak and a liar.”

“Well, what if we did?” said Barcoo, defiantly. “He’s all that, and a cheat into the bargain. And now, what are you going to do about it?”

The old man swung sideways to the bar, rested his elbow on it, and his head on his hand.

“Macquarie wasn’t a sneak and he wasn’t a liar,” he said, in a quiet, tired tone; “and Macquarie wasn’t a cheat!”

“Well, old man, you needn’t get your rag out about it,” said Sally Thompson, soothingly. “P’r’aps we was a bit too hard on him; and it isn’t altogether right, chaps, considerin’ he’s not here. But, then, you know, Awful, he might have acted straight to you that was his mate. The meanest blank—if he is a man at all—will do that.”

“Oh, to blazes with the old sot!” shouted Barcoo. “I gave my opinion about Macquarie, and, what’s more, I’ll stand to it.”

“I’ve got—I’ve got a point for the defence,” the old man went on, without heeding the interruptions. “I’ve got a point or two for the defence.”

“Well, let’s have it,” said Stiffner.

“In the first place—in the first place, Macquarie never talked about no man behind his back.”

There was an uneasy movement, and a painful silence. Barcoo reached for his drink and drank slowly; he needed time to think—Box-o’-Tricks studied his boots—Sally Thompson looked out at the weather—the shanty-keeper wiped the top of the bar very hard—and the rest shifted round and “s’posed they’d try a game er cards.”

Barcoo set his glass down very softly, pocketed his hands deeply and defiantly, and said:

“Well, what of that? Macquarie was as strong as a bull, and the greatest bully on the river into the bargain. He could call a man a liar to his face—and smash his face afterwards. And he did it often, too, and with smaller men than himself.”

There was a breath of relief in the bar.

“Do you want to make out that I’m talking about a man behind his back?” continued Barcoo, threateningly, to Awful Example. “You’d best take care, old man.”

“Macquarie wasn’t a coward,” remonstrated the drunkard, softly, but in an injured tone.

“What’s up with you, anyway?” yelled the publican. “What yer growling at? D’ye want a row? Get out if yer can’t be agreeable!”

The boozier swung his back to the bar, hooked himself on by his elbows, and looked vacantly out of the door.

“I’ve gut—another point for the defence,” he muttered. “It’s always best—it’s always best to keep the last point to—the last.”

“Oh, Lord! Well, out with it! *Out with it!*”

“*Macquarie’s dead!* That—that’s what it is!”

Everyone moved uneasily: Sally Thompson turned the other side to the bar, crossed one leg behind the other, and looked down over his hip at the sole and heel of his elastic-side—the barman rinsed the glasses vigorously—Longbones shuffled and dealt on the top of a cask, and some of the others gathered round him and got interested—Barcoo thought he heard his horse breaking away, and went out to see to it, followed by Box-o’-Tricks and a couple more, who thought that it might be one of their horses.

Someone—a tall, gaunt, determined-looking bushman, with square features and haggard grey eyes—had ridden in unnoticed through the scrub to the back of the shanty and dismounted by the window.

When Barcoo and the others re-entered the bar it soon became evident that Sally Thompson had been thinking, for presently he came to the general rescue as follows

“There’s a blessed lot of tommy-rot about dead people in this world—a lot of damned old-woman nonsense. There’s more sympathy wasted over dead and rotten skunks than there is justice done to straight, honest-livin’ chaps. I don’t b’lieve in this gory sentiment about the dead at the expense of the living. I b’lieve in justice for the livin’—and the dead too, for that matter—but justice for the livin’. Macquarie was a bad egg, and it don’t alter the case if he was dead a thousand times.”

There was another breath of relief in the bar, and presently somebody said: “Yer right, Sally!”

“Good for you, Sally, old man!” cried Box-o’-Tricks, taking it up. “An’, besides, I don’t b’lieve Macquarie is dead at all. He’s always dyin’, or being reported dead, and then turnin’ up again. Where did you hear about it, Awful?”

The Example ruefully rubbed a corner of his roof with the palm of his hand.

“There’s—there’s a lot in what you say, Sally Thompson,” he admitted slowly, totally ignoring Box-o’-Tricks. “But—but—”

“Oh, we’ve had enough of the old fool,” yelled Barcoo. “Macquarie was a spieler, and any man that ud be his mate ain’t much better.”

“Here, take a drink and dry up, yer ole bass!” said the man behind the bar, pushing a bottle and glass towards the drunkard. “D’ye want a row?”

The old man took the bottle and glass in his shaking hands and painfully poured out a drink.

“There’s a lot in what Sally Thompson says,” he went on, obstinately, “but—but,” he added in a strained tone, “there’s another point that I near forgot, and none of you seemed to think of it—not even Sally Thompson nor—nor Box-o’-Tricks there.”

Stiffner turned his back, and Barcoo spat viciously and impatiently.

“Yes,” drivelled the drunkard, “I’ve got another point for—for the defence—of my mate, Macquarie—”

“Oh, out with it! Spit it out, for God’s sake, or you’ll bust!” roared Stiffner. “What the blazes is it?”

“HIS MATE’S ALIVE!” yelled the old man. “Macquarie’s mate’s alive! That’s what it is!”

He reeled back from the bar, dashed his glass and hat to the boards, gave his pants a hitch by the waistband that almost lifted him off his feet, and tore at his shirt-sleeves.

“Make a ring, boys,” he shouted. “His mate’s alive! Put up your hands, Barcoo! By God, his mate’s alive!”

Someone had turned his horse loose at the rear and had been standing by the back door for the last five minutes. Now he slipped quietly in.

“Keep the old fool off, or he’ll get hurt,” snarled Barcoo.

Stiffner jumped the counter. There were loud, hurried words of remonstrance, then some stump-splitting oaths and a scuffle, consequent upon an attempt to chuck the old man out.

Then a crash. Stiffner and Box-o'-Tricks were down, two others were holding Barcoo back, and someone had pinned Awful Example by the shoulders from behind.

“Let me go!” he yelled, too blind with passion to notice the movements of surprise among the men before him. “Let me go! I’ll smash—any man—that—that says a word again’ a mate of mine behind his back. Barcoo, I’ll have your blood! Let me go! I’ll, I’ll, I’ll ——Who’s holdin’ me! You—you—

“It’s Macquarie, old mate!” said a quiet voice.

Barcoo thought he heard his horse again, and went out in a hurry. Perhaps he thought that the horse would get impatient and break loose if he left it any longer, for he jumped into the saddle and rode off.

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