No Place for a Woman

Henry Lawson

He had a selection on a long box-scrub siding of the ridges, about half a mile back and up from the coach road. There were no neighbours that I ever heard of, and the nearest "town" was thirty miles away. He grew wheat among the stumps of his clearing, sold the crop standing to a Cockie who lived ten miles away, and had some surplus sons; or, some seasons, he reaped it by hand, had it thrashed by travelling "steamer" (portable steam engine and machine), and carried the grain, a few bags at a time, into the mill on his rickety dray.

He had lived alone for upwards of 15 years, and was known to those who knew him as "Ratty Howlett".

Trav'lers and strangers failed to see anything uncommonly ratty about him. It was known, or, at least, it was believed, without question, that while at work he kept his horse saddled and bridled, and hung up to the fence, or grazing about, with the saddle on—or, anyway, close handy for a moment's notice—and whenever he caught sight, over the scrub and through the quarter-mile break in it, of a traveller on the road, he would jump on his horse and make after him. If it was a horseman he usually pulled him up inside of a mile. Stories were told of unsuccessful chases, misunderstandings, and complications arising out of Howlett's mania for running down and bailing up travellers. Sometimes he caught one every day for a week, sometimes not one for weeks—it was a lonely track.

The explanation was simple, sufficient, and perfectly natural—from a bushman's point of view. Ratty only wanted to have a yarn. He and the traveller would camp in the shade for half an hour or so and yarn and smoke. The old man would find out where the traveller came from, and how long he'd been there, and where he was making for, and how long he reckoned he'd be away; and ask if there had been any rain along the traveller's back track, and how the country looked after the drought; and he'd get the traveller's ideas on abstract questions— if he had any. If it was a footman (swagman), and he was short of tobacco, old Howlett always had half a stick ready for him. Sometimes, but very rarely, he'd invite the swagman back to the hut for a pint of tea, or a bit of meat, flour, tea, or sugar, to carry him along the track.

And, after the yarn by the road, they said, the old man would ride back, refreshed, to his lonely selection, and work on into the night as long as he could see his solitary old plough horse, or the scoop of his long-handled shovel.

And so it was that I came to make his acquaintance—or, rather, that he made mine. I was cantering easily along the track —I was making for the north-west with a pack horse—when about a mile beyond the track to the selection I heard, "Hi, Mister!" and saw a dust cloud

following me. I had heard of “Old Ratty Howlett” casually, and so was prepared for him.

A tall gaunt man on a little horse. He was clean-shaven, except for a frill beard round under his chin, and his long wavy, dark hair was turning grey; a square, strong-faced man, and reminded me of one full-faced portrait of Gladstone more than any other face I had seen. He had large reddish-brown eyes, deep set under heavy eyebrows, and with something of the blackfellow in them—the sort of eyes that will peer at something on the horizon that no one else can see. He had a way of talking to the horizon, too—more than to his companion; and he had a deep vertical wrinkle in his forehead that no smile could lessen.

I got down and got out my pipe, and we sat on a log and yarned awhile on bush subjects; and then, after a pause, he shifted uneasily, it seemed to me, and asked rather abruptly, and in an altered tone, if I was married. A queer question to ask a traveller; more especially in my case, as I was little more than a boy then.

He talked on again of old things and places where we had both been, and asked after men he knew, or had known—drovers and others—and whether they were living yet. Most of his inquiries went back before my time; but some of the drovers, one or two overlanders with whom he had been mates in his time, had grown old into mine, and I knew them. I notice now, though I didn’t then—and if I had it would not have seemed strange from a bush point of view—that he didn’t ask for news, nor seem interested in it.

Then after another uneasy pause, during which he scratched crosses in the dust with a stick, he asked me, in the same queer tone and without looking at me or looking up, if I happened to know anything about doctoring—if I’d ever studied it.

I asked him if anyone was sick at his place. He hesitated, and said “No.” Then I wanted to know why he had asked me that question, and he was so long about answering that I began to think he was hard of hearing, when, at last, he muttered something about my face reminding him of a young fellow he knew of who’d gone to Sydney to “study for a doctor”. That might have been, and looked natural enough; but why didn’t he ask me straight out if I was the chap he “knowed of”? Travellers do not like beating about the bush in conversation.

He sat in silence for a good while, with his arms folded, and looking absently away over the dead level of the great scrubs that spread from the foot of the ridge we were on to where a blue peak or two of a distant range showed above the bush on the horizon.

I stood up and put my pipe away and stretched. Then he seemed to wake up. “Better come back to the hut and have a bit of dinner,” he said. “The missus will about have it ready, and I’ll spare you a handful of hay for the horses.”

The hay decided it. It was a dry season. I was surprised to hear of a wife, for I thought he was a hatter—I had always heard so; but perhaps I had been mistaken, and he had married lately; or had got a housekeeper. The farm was an irregularly-shaped clearing in the scrub, with a good many stumps in it, with a broken-down two-rail fence along the frontage, and logs and "dog-leg" the rest. It was about as lonely-looking a place as I had seen, and I had seen some out-of-the-way, God-forgotten holes where men lived alone. The hut was in the top corner, a two-roomed slab hut, with a shingle roof, which must have been uncommon round there in the days when that hut was built. I was used to bush carpentering, and saw that the place had been put up by a man who had plenty of life and hope in front of him, and for someone else beside himself. But there were two unfinished skilling rooms built on to the back of the hut; the posts, sleepers, and wall-plates had been well put up and fitted, and the slab walls were up, but the roof had never been put on. There was nothing but burrs and nettles inside those walls, and an old wooden bullock plough and a couple of yokes were dry-rotting across the back doorway. The remains of a straw-stack, some hay under a bark humpy, a small iron plough, and an old stiff coffin-headed grey draught horse, were all that I saw about the place.

But there was a bit of a surprise for me inside, in the shape of a clean white tablecloth on the rough slab table which stood on stakes driven into the ground. The cloth was coarse, but it was a tablecloth —not a spare sheet put on in honour of unexpected visitors—and perfectly clean. The tin plates, pannikins, and jam tins that served as sugar bowls and salt cellars were polished brightly. The walls and fireplace were whitewashed, the clay floor swept, and clean sheets of newspaper laid on the slab mantleshelf under the row of biscuit tins that held the groceries. I thought that his wife, or housekeeper, or whatever she was, was a clean and tidy woman about a house. I saw no woman; but on the sofa —a light, wooden, batten one, with runged arms at the ends—lay a woman's dress on a lot of sheets of old stained and faded newspapers. He looked at it in a puzzled way, knitting his forehead, then took it up absently and folded it. I saw then that it was a riding skirt and jacket. He bundled them into the newspapers and took them into the bedroom.

"The wife was going on a visit down the creek this afternoon," he said rapidly and without looking at me, but stooping as if to have another look through the door at those distant peaks. "I suppose she got tired o' waitin', and went and took the daughter with her. But, never mind, the grub is ready." There was a camp-oven with a leg of mutton and potatoes sizzling in it on the hearth, and billies hanging over the fire. I noticed the billies had been scraped, and the lids polished.

There seemed to be something queer about the whole business, but then he and his wife might have had a "breeze" during the morning. I thought so during the meal, when the subject of women came up, and he said one never knew how to take a woman, etc.; but there was nothing in what he said that need necessarily have referred to his wife or to any woman in particular. For the rest he talked of old bush things, droving, digging, and old

bushranging—but never about live things and living men, unless any of the old mates he talked about happened to be alive by accident. He was very restless in the house, and never took his hat off.

There was a dress and a woman's old hat hanging on the wall near the door, but they looked as if they might have been hanging there for a lifetime. There seemed something queer about the whole place—something wanting; but then all out-of-the-way bush homes are haunted by that something wanting, or, more likely, by the spirits of the things that should have been there, but never had been.

As I rode down the track to the road I looked back and saw old Howlett hard at work in a hole round a big stump with his long-handled shovel.

I'd noticed that he moved and walked with a slight list to port, and put his hand once or twice to the small of his back, and I set it down to lumbago, or something of that sort.

Up in the Never Never I heard from a drover who had known Howlett that his wife had died in the first year, and so this mysterious woman, if she was his wife, was, of course, his second wife. The drover seemed surprised and rather amused at the thought of old Howlett going in for matrimony again.

I rode back that way five years later, from the Never Never. It was early in the morning—I had ridden since midnight. I didn't think the old man would be up and about; and, besides, I wanted to get on home, and have a look at the old folk, and the mates I'd left behind—and the girl. But I hadn't got far past the point where Howlett's track joined the road, when I happened to look back, and saw him on horseback, stumbling down the track. I waited till he came up.

He was riding the old grey draught horse this time, and it looked very much broken down. I thought it would have come down every step, and fallen like an old rotten humpy in a gust of wind. And the old man was not much better off. I saw at once that he was a very sick man. His face was drawn, and he bent forward as if he was hurt. He got down stiffly and awkwardly, like a hurt man, and as soon as his feet touched the ground he grabbed my arm, or he would have gone down like a man who steps off a train in motion. He hung towards the bank of the road, feeling blindly, as it were, for the ground, with his free hand, as I eased him down. I got my blanket and calico from the pack saddle to make him comfortable.

"Help me with my back agen the tree," he said. "I must sit up— it's no use lyin' me down."

He sat with his hand gripping his side, and breathed painfully.

“Shall I run up to the hut and get the wife?” I asked.

“No.” He spoke painfully. “No!” Then, as if the words were jerked out of him by a spasm: “She ain’t there.”

I took it that she had left him.

“How long have you been bad? How long has this been coming on?”

He took no notice of the question. I thought it was a touch of rheumatic fever, or something of that sort. “It’s gone into my back and sides now—the pain’s worse in me back,” he said presently.

I had once been mates with a man who died suddenly of heart disease, while at work. He was washing a dish of dirt in the creek near a claim we were working; he let the dish slip into the water, fell back, crying, “O, my back!” and was gone. And now I felt by instinct that it was poor old Howlett’s heart that was wrong. A man’s heart is in his back as well as in his arms and hands.

The old man had turned pale with the pallor of a man who turns faint in a heat wave, and his arms fell loosely, and his hands rocked helplessly with the knuckles in the dust. I felt myself turning white, too, and the sick, cold, empty feeling in my stomach, for I knew the signs. Bushmen stand in awe of sickness and death.

But after I’d fixed him comfortably and given him a drink from the water bag the greyness left his face, and he pulled himself together a bit; he drew up his arms and folded them across his chest. He let his head rest back against the tree—his slouch hat had fallen off revealing a broad, white brow, much higher than I expected. He seemed to gaze on the azure fin of the range, showing above the dark blue-green bush on the horizon.

Then he commenced to speak—taking no notice of me when I asked him if he felt better now—to talk in that strange, absent, far-away tone that awes one. He told his story mechanically, monotonously—in set words, as I believe now, as he had often told it before; if not to others, then to the loneliness of the bush. And he used the names of people and places that I had never heard of—just as if I knew them as well as he did.

“I didn’t want to bring her up the first year. It was no place for a woman. I wanted her to stay with her people and wait till I’d got the place a little more ship-shape. The Phippses took a selection down the creek. I wanted her to wait and come up with them so’s she’d have some company— a woman to talk to. They came afterwards, but they didn’t stop. It was no place for a woman.

“But Mary would come. She wouldn’t stop with her people down country. She wanted to be with me, and look after me, and work and help me.”

He repeated himself a great deal—said the same thing over and over again sometimes. He was only mad on one track. He’d tail off and sit silent for a while; then he’d become aware of me in a hurried, half-scared way, and apologise for putting me to all that trouble, and thank me. “I’ll be all right d’reckly. Best take the horses up to the hut and have some breakfast; you’ll find it by the fire. I’ll foller you, d’reckly. The wife’ll be waitin’ an’——” He would drop off, and be going again presently on the old track:—

“Her mother was coming up to stay awhile at the end of the year, but the old man hurt his leg. Then her married sister was coming, but one of the youngsters got sick and there was trouble at home. I saw the doctor in the town—thirty miles from here—and fixed it up with him. He was a boozer—I’d ’a shot him afterwards. I fixed up with a woman in the town to come and stay. I thought Mary was wrong in her time. She must have been a month or six weeks out. But I listened to her. . . . Don’t argue with a woman. Don’t listen to a woman. Do the right thing. We should have had a mother woman to talk to us. But it was no place for a woman!”

He rocked his head, as if from some old agony of mind, against the tree-trunk.

“She was took bad suddenly one night, but it passed off. False alarm. I was going to ride somewhere, but she said to wait till daylight. Someone was sure to pass. She was a brave and sensible girl, but she had a terror of being left alone. It was no place for a woman!

“There was a black shepherd three or four miles away. I rode over while Mary was asleep, and started the black boy into town. I’d ’a shot him afterwards if I’d ’a caught him. The old black gin was dead the week before, or Mary would a’ bin alright. She was tied up in a bunch with strips of blanket and greenhide, and put in a hole. So there wasn’t even a gin near the place. It was no place for a woman!

“I was watchin’ the road at daylight, and I was watchin’ the road at dusk. I went down in the hollow and stooped down to get the gap agen the sky, so’s I could see if anyone was comin’ over. . . . I’d get on the horse and gallop along towards the town for five miles, but something would drag me back, and then I’d race for fear she’d die before I got to the hut. I expected the doctor every five minutes.

“It come on about daylight next morning. I ran back’ards and for’ards between the hut and the road like a madman. And no one come. I was running amongst the logs and stumps, and fallin’ over them, when I saw a cloud of dust agen sunrise. It was her mother an’ sister in the spring-cart, an’ just catchin’ up to them was the doctor in his buggy with the woman I’d

arranged with in town. The mother and sister was staying at the town for the night, when they heard of the black boy. It took him a day to ride there. I'd 'a shot him if I'd 'a caught him ever after. The doctor'd been on the drunk. If I'd had the gun and known she was gone I'd have shot him in the buggy. They said she was dead. And the child was dead, too.

"They blamed me, but I didn't want her to come; it was no place for a woman. I never saw them again after the funeral. I didn't want to see them any more."

He moved his head wearily against the tree, and presently drifted on again in a softer tone—his eyes and voice were growing more absent and dreamy and far away.

"About a month after—or a year, I lost count of the time long ago—she came back to me. At first she'd come in the night, then sometimes when I was at work—and she had the baby—it was a girl—in her arms. And by-and-bye she came to stay altogether. . . . I didn't blame her for going away that time—it was no place for a woman. . . . She was a good wife to me. She was a jolly girl when I married her. The little girl grew up like her. I was going to send her down country to be educated—it was no place for a girl.

"But a month, or a year, ago, Mary left me, and took the daughter, and never came back till last night—this morning, I think it was. I thought at first it was the girl with her hair done up, and her mother's skirt on, to surprise her old dad. But it was Mary, my wife—as she was when I married her. She said she couldn't stay, but she'd wait for me on the road; on—the road. . . ."

His arms fell, and his face went white. I got the water-bag. "Another turn like that and you'll be gone," I thought, as he came to again. Then I suddenly thought of a shanty that had been started, when I came that way last, ten or twelve miles along the road, towards the town. There was nothing for it but to leave him and ride on for help, and a cart of some kind.

"You wait here till I come back," I said. "I'm going for the doctor."

He roused himself a little. "Best come up to the hut and get some grub. The wife'll be waiting. . . ." He was off the track again.

"Will you wait while I take the horse down to the creek?"

"Yes—I'll wait by the road."

"Look!" I said, "I'll leave the water-bag handy. Don't move till I come back."

"I won't move—I'll wait by the road," he said.

I took the packhorse, which was the freshest and best, threw the pack-saddle and bags into a bush, left the other horse to take care of itself, and started for the shanty, leaving the old man with his back to the tree, his arms folded, and his eyes on the horizon.

One of the chaps at the shanty rode on for the doctor at once, while the other came back with me in a spring-cart. He told me that old Howlett's wife had died in child-birth the first year on the selection—"she was a fine girl he'd heered!" He told me the story as the old man had told it, and in pretty well the same words, even to giving it as his opinion that it was no place for a woman. "And he 'hatted' and brooded over it till he went ratty."

I knew the rest. He not only thought that his wife, or the ghost of his wife, had been with him all those years, but that the child had lived and grown up, and that the wife did the housework; which, of course, he must have done himself.

When we reached him his knotted hands had fallen for the last time, and they were at rest. I only took one quick look at his face, but could have sworn that he was gazing at the blue fin of the range on the horizon of the bush.

Up at the hut the table was set as on the first day I saw it, and breakfast in the camp-oven by the fire.