

Henry Lawson

*The Bush Undertaker
(or A Christmas in the
Far West)*

1892

‘Five Bob!’ The old man shaded his eyes and peered through the dazzling glow of that broiling Christmas Day. He stood just within the door of a slab-and-bark hut situated upon the bank of a barren creek; sheep-yards lay to the right, and a low line of bare brown ridges formed a suitable background to the scene.

‘Five Bob!’ shouted he again; and a dusty-looking sheep-dog rose wearily from the shade by the side of the hut and looked inquiringly at his master, as the latter pointed towards some sheep which were strangling away from the main flock.

‘Fetch ’em back,’ he said confidently. The dog went off obediently, and his master returned to the interior of the hut.

‘We’ll yard ’em early,’ he said to himself; ‘the super won’t know. We’ll yard ’em early, and have the afternoon to ourselves.’

‘We’ll get dinner,’ he added, glancing at some pots on the fire. ‘I cud do a bit of doughboy, an’ that theer boggabria’ll eat like marrer, along of the salt junk.’ He rose and slightly moved one of the black buckets from the blaze. ‘I likes to keep it jist on the bile,’ he said in explanation to

himself. 'I don't like it to bile too hard. It makes it tough,—I likes to keep it jist a-simmerin'.'

Here his meditations were interrupted by the entrance of the dog.

'All right, Five Bob,' said the hermit; 'dinner'll be ready dreckly. Jist keep yer eye on the sheep till I calls yer; keep 'em well rounded up, 'n' we'll yard 'em arterwards and have a holiday.'

This speech was accompanied by a gesture evidently intelligible to the dog, who retired as though he understood English,—and the cooking proceeded.

'I'll take a pick 'n' shovel with me and dig up that old black fellow,' mused the shepherd, evidently following up an old train of thought; 'I reckon it'll nearly do now. I'll give it a minet's more bilin' 'n' put in the spuds.'

The last sentence referred to the cooking, the first to a supposed black fellow's grave about which he was curious.

'The sheep is a-settling down to camp,' said the soliloquiser, glancing through the door. 'So me an' Five Bob'll be able to get our dinner in peace. I wish I had enough fat to make the pan siss, I'd treat meself to a leather-jacket; but it took three weeks' skimmin' to get enough for them doughboys.'

In due time the dinner was dished up; and the solitaire seated himself on a block, with the lid of a gin-case across his knees for a table. Five Bob squatted opposite with the liveliest interest and appreciation depicted on his intelligent countenance.

Dinner proceeded very quietly, except when the carver paused to ask the dog how some tasty morsel went with him; and Five Bob's tail declared that it went very well indeed.

'Here y'are, try this,' cried the old man, tossing the dog a large piece of 'doughboy;' a click of Five Bob's jaws and the dough was gone.

The old shepherd then 'washed up' the tinware in the water in which the 'duff' had boiled, and afterwards, with the assistance of the dog, yarded the sheep.

This accomplished, he took a pick and shovel and an old bag from under his bunk, and started out over the range, followed, of course, by his faithful friend and confidant. After tramping some three miles a 'spur,' running out from the main ridge, was reached. At the extreme end of this, under some gum-trees, was a little mound of earth barely defined in the grass. This was the supposed black fellow's grave, about which the old man had some doubts.

He set to work to dig it up, and, sure enough, in about half an hour, he bottomed on 'payable dirt,' or, rather, a skeleton.

As soon as he had raked up all the bones, he amused himself by putting them together on the grass and speculating as to whether they belonged to black or white or male or female. Failing, however, to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, he dusted the bones with great care, put them in the bag, and started for home.

He took a short cut this time, over the ridge and down a gully which was full of dead ring-barked trees and long white grass. He had nearly reached its mouth when a great greasy black 'gohanna' (iguana) suddenly clambered up a sapling from under his feet and looked fightable.

'Dang the jump-up thing!' cried the old man. 'It did give me a start!'

At the foot of this tree he then espied an object which he at first took to be the blackened carcase of a sheep, but on closer examination discovered to be the body of a man, which lay on its stomach with its face resting on its hands, dried to a mummy by the intense heat of the western summer.

'Me luck's in for the day!' said the bushman, scratching the back of his head while he took stock of the remains. He then picked up a stick and tapped the body on the shoulder: the flesh sounded like leather, and he turned the body over on its side; it fell flat on its back like a board, and the shrivelled eyes seemed to peer up at him from under the blackened wrists.

He stepped back involuntarily, but, recovering himself, he leaned on his stick and took in all the ghastly details.

There was nothing in the blackened features to tell aught of name or race, but the dress proclaimed the remains to be those of a European. Suddenly the old man caught sight of a black bottle in the grass close beside the corpse. This set him thinking. Presently his gathering suspicions settled into convictions, and exclaiming 'Brummy!' he knelt down and examined the soles of the dead man's Blucher boots, and then, rising with an air of conviction, said impressively, 'Yes, it's Brummy!—busted up at last! I told yer so, Brummy; I allers told yer as how it 'ud be—an' here y'are. Yer allers was a fool, Brummy. Yer cud earn mor'n any man in the colony, but yer'd slush it all away in drink. I allers sed as how it 'ud end, an' now yer kin see fur y'self.'

'I 'spect yer was a comin' ter me ter get fixt up 'n' set straight, same as yer allers uster come; then yer was agoin' to sweer off, same as yer allers uster sweer off; 'n' here y'ar', 'n' now I expect I'll have ter fix yer up for the last time an' make yer decent, for t'won't do ter leave yer a-laying here like the fool yer allers was.'

He picked up the corked bottle and examined it. To his great surprise it was more than half full of rum.

'Well, this gets me,' exclaimed the old man; 'me luck's in for this Christmas, sure. Yer must 'a' got the jams pretty early in yer spree, or yer wouldn't be making for me with near a bottleful left. Howsomenever, here's t'yeh health, Brummy.'

The old man looked round until his eyes fell upon some sheets of bark which lay close by, and he now took two pieces of bark, one about four and the other six feet long, and each about two feet wide, and brought them over to the body. He laid the longest strip by the side of the corpse, which he proceeded to lift on to it.

'Come on, Brummy,' he said, in a softer tone than usual. 'Come on, Brummy, 'n' don't be layin' there in that state any longer. Yer ain't as bad as yer might be, considerin' that it must be three months since yer slipped yer wind. I'spect it was the rum as preserved yer. It was the death of yer when yer was alive, 'n' now yer dead 'n' no good to nobody (which yer never warn't), it preserved yer in good condition.'

He then placed the other sheet of bark on top, with the hollow side downwards,—thus sandwiching the defunct between the two pieces—removed the saddle strap which he wore in the place of braces, buckled it round one end of the elongated sandwich, while he puzzled himself to think of something to tie up the other end.

'I can't afford any more strips off my shirt,' he said, critically examining the skirts of the old blue overshirt he wore. 'I might git a strip or two more off, but it's short enough already. Let's see; when did I buy that shirt? Oh, I remember, it was jist two days arter Five Bob was pupped. I bought the cabbage-tree hat a week before. I can't afford a new shirt jist yet;—howsomenever, seeing it's Brummy, I'll jist borrow a couple more strips. I kin sew 'em on agen when I git home.'

So saying, he tore another strip off his shirt, and fastened up the other end of the improvised mummy-case. The corpse now looked as though it was in splints for a broken back.

'I'll have ter leave the tools here,' reflected the old man. 'I can't carry everythink. I'll shove 'em in a log till termorrer. Come on, Brummy, we'll git home.'

He up-ended Brummy, and, placing his shoulder against the middle of the lower sheet of bark, lifted the corpse to a horizontal position, then, taking the bag of bones in his hand, started for home.

'I ain't spending such a dull Christmas arter all,' he reflected as he

plodded on; but had not walked above a hundred yards when he suddenly saw a black 'gohanna' sidling off into the grass by the side of the path.

'That's another of them dang things!' he exclaimed. 'That's two I seen this morning.'

'Yer don't smell any too sweet, Brummy,' he continued presently, addressing the corpse. 'It must have jist been about the middle of shearing when yer pegged out. I wonder who got yer last cheque. Shoo ! there's another black gohanna—there must be a flock on 'em.'

He rested Brummy on the ground while he had another pull at the bottle, and, before starting again, packed the bag of bones on his shoulder under Brummy, but soon stopped again.

'The thunderin' jump-t-up bones won't keep straight,' he said. 'Ole on, Brummy, 'n' I'll fix 'em;' and he leaned the dead man against a tree while he settled the bones on his shoulder, and took another pull at the bottle.

About a mile further on he heard a rustling in the grass to the right, and, looking round, saw another black 'gohanna' gliding off sideways with its long snaky neck turned to watch him.

This puzzled the old man considerably, and the strangest part of it was that Five Bob would not touch the reptile, even when ordered to 'sick 'em,' but slunk off with his tail between his legs.

'Theer's sothin' uncanny about them theer gohannas,' said the old man at last. 'I seen swarms of grasshoppers 'n' big mobs of kangeroos, but dang me if ever I seen a flock of black gohannas before!'

On reaching the hut the old man dumped the corpse over his shoulder against the wall, wrong end up, and stood scratching his head while he endeavoured to collect his muddled thoughts; but he had not placed Brummy at the correct angle to the wall, and consequently that individual fell forward and struck him a violent blow on the shoulder with the iron toes of his Blucher boots.

The shock sobered him. He sprang a good yard and instinctively hitched up his moleskins in preparation for flight, till a backward glance revealed to him the true cause of this attack from the rear. Then he lifted the body, stood it on its feet against the chimney, and ruminated as to where he should lodge his mate for the night, not noticing that the shorter sheet of bark had slipped down on the boots and left the face exposed.

'I 'spect I'll have ter put yer into the chimney-trough for the night, Brummy,' said he, turning round to confront the corpse. 'Yer can't expect me to take you into the hut, though I did it when yer was in a worse state than—Lord!'

The shepherd was not prepared for the awful scrutiny (if so it might be named) that gleamed on him from those empty sockets; his nerves received a severe shock, and it was some time before he recovered himself sufficiently to speak.

'Now look here, Brummy,' said he, shaking his finger severely at the delinquent, 'I don't want to be hard on yer; I'd do as much for yer 'n' more than any other man, 'n' well yer knows it; but if yer starts playin' any of yer jumpt-up larks on me, and a-scarin' of me after a-humpin' of yer home, by the holy frost ('n' that's sweerin' to it) I'll kick yer to jim-rags.'

This admonition delivered, he hoisted Brummy into the chimney-trough, and with a last glance towards the sheep-yards, he retired to his bunk to enjoy a well-earned nap.

He had more than a nap, however, for when he woke it was dark, and the bushman's instinct told him that it must be nearly nine o'clock.

He lit the fat lamp and poured the remainder of the rum into a pannikin; but just as he was about to lift the draught to his lips he heard a peculiar rustling sound on the roof, and he put the pot down on the table with a slam that made some of the contents jump out.

The dog crept close to his master and whimpered, and the old shepherd, used, as one living alone in the bush must necessarily be, to all that is weird and dismal, felt for once, at least, the icy breath of fear at his heart.

He then loaded his old single-barrel shot-gun hastily, and went out to investigate. He walked round the hut several times and examined the roof on all sides, but saw nothing; the corpse appeared to be in the same position.

At last, persuading himself that the noise was caused by 'possums or the wind, the old man returned to his hut, boiled the billy, and after composing his nerves somewhat with a light supper and a meditative smoke, retired for the night. He was aroused several times before midnight by the same peculiar rustling sound above his head, and though he rose and examined the roof on each occasion by the light of the moon, which had risen, discovered nothing.

At last he determined to sit up and watch until daybreak, and for this purpose took up a position on a log a little distance from the hut, with his gun laid across his knees in readiness.

About an hour later he saw a black object coming over the ridgepole, and fired. It fell, and he ran round to the opposite side of the hut, where there was an immense black 'gohanna' in violent convulsions on the ground.

Then the old man saw it all. 'The thunderin' jumt-up thing!' he exclaimed; 'it's that same danged first gohanna a-follered of me home, 'n' has been havin' his Christmas dinner of Brummy, and a-hauntin' of me into the bargain.'

As there was no one by whom he could send a message to the station, and the old man dared not leave the sheep and go himself, he determined to bury Brummy the next afternoon, reflecting that the authorities could disinter the corpse for inquest if they pleased.

So he brought the sheep home early, and made arrangements for the burial by measuring the outer casing of Brummy both ways, and digging a hole according to those dimensions.

'Come on, Brummy, it's time yer turned in,' said he, lifting the body down. He carried it to the grave and lowered it down in one corner, end first, like a post. He then arranged the bark so as to cover the face, and by means of a line dropped the body to a horizontal position, threw in an armful of gum leaves, and then very reluctantly took the shovel and dropped in a few shovelfuls of earth; then he paused.

'Arter all,' he said, leaning on his spade and wiping his brow—'arter all it war Brummy!'

This reflection seemed to engender a flood of memories, in which the old man became absorbed. He leaned heavily upon his spade and thought.

'Brummy,' he said at last, 'it's all over now; nothin' matters now; nothin' didn't ever matter, nor don't. You uster say as how it 'ud be all right termorrer (pause); termorrer's come, Brummy—come fur you—it ain't come fur me yet, but it's comin'.'

He threw in some more earth. 'Yer don't remember, Brummy, 'n' mebbe yer don't want to remember—I don't want to remember—but—but—well, yer see that's w'ere yer got the pull on me.' His mind was evidently wandering.

He shovelled in some more earth and paused again.

The dog rose with ears erect and looked anxiously first at his master and then down into the grave.

'Theer oughter be somethin' sed,' muttered the old man; 'tain't right to put 'im under like a dog. There oughter be some sort of sarmin'. He sighed heavily in the silence that followed this remark, and, proceeding with his work, filled the grave to the brim this time, and fashioned the mound carefully with his spade. Once or twice he muttered the words, 'I am the rassaraction.' He was evidently trying to remember the something

that 'oughter be sed,' and stood by the side of the grave. He removed his hat, placed it carefully on the grass, held his open hands out from his sides and a little to the front, drew a long deep breath, and said with a solemnity that greatly disturbed Five Bob, 'Hashes ter hashes, dus ter dus, Brummy.' Then he sat down and covered his face with his hands.

And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush—the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and much that is different from things in other lands.