

The Bush Undertaker

Henry Lawson

"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 sheep-dog rose wearily from the shaded side of the hut and looked inquiringly at his master, who pointed towards some sheep which were straggling from the flock.

"Fetch 'em back," he said confidently.

The dog went off, 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 artemoon 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 boggabri'll eat like tater-marrer along of the salt meat." He moved one of the black buckets from the blaze. "I likes to keep it jist on the sizzle," he said in explanation to himself; "hard bilin' makes it tough--I'll keep it jist a-simmerin'."

Here his soliloquy was interrupted by the return of the dog.

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

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

"I'll take a pick an' shovel with me an' root up that old blackfellow," mused the shepherd, evidently following up a recent train of thought; "I reckon it'll do now. I'll put in the spuds."

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

"The sheep's a-campin'," said the soliloquizer, glancing through the door. "So me an' Five Bob'll be able to get our dinner in peace. I wish I had just enough fat to make the pan siss; I'd treat myself to a leather-jacket; but it took three weeks' skimmin' to get enough for them theer doughboys."

In due time the dinner was dished up; and the old man 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 him a large piece of doughboy. A click of Five Bob's jaws and the dough was gone.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 10:25 AM

Comment [1]: Setting the scene, Heat imagery of "broiling, barren, bare and brown" Plosive sound created by the use of alliteration suggest the obvious harshness of environment

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 10:32 AM

Comment [2]: Use of phonetic spelling to mimic the accent and pronunciation of the persona. Allows the reader to hear the character as he speaks – also alienates the reader – to see words spelt this way removes them from the persona and make the reader work hard to understand such a unique character, his long isolation from society.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:19 AM

Comment [3]: Ironic reference to BU's tendency to talk to himself, drawing reference between the eloquence of a Shakespearean character to the BU's inane and broken dialogue

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:21 AM

Comment [4]: Contrasting imagery and tone, formal language and tone suggests the dinner is more elegant than it is, particularly in second sentence – produces humour for the audience as the two are incongruent

"Clean into his liver!" said the old man with a faint smile. He washed up the tinware in the water the duff had been boiled in, and then, with the assistance of the dog, yarded the sheep.

This accomplished, he took a pick and shovel and an old sack, and started out over the ridge, followed, of course, by his four-legged mate. After tramping some three miles he reached a spur, running out from the main ridge. At the extreme end of this, under some gum-trees, was a little mound of earth, barely defined in the grass, and indented in the centre as all blackfellows' graves were.

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

When he had raked up all the bones, he amused himself by putting them together on the grass and by speculating as to whether they had belonged to black or white, male or female. Failing, however, to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, he dusted them 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 ring-barked trees and long white grass. He had nearly reached its mouth when a great greasy black goanna clambered up a sapling from under his feet and looked fightable.

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

At the foot of the sapling he espied an object which he at first thought was the blackened carcass of a sheep, but on closer examination discovered to be the body of a man; it lay with its forehead resting on its hands, dried to a mummy by the intense heat of the western summer.

"Me luck's in for the day and no mistake!" said the shepherd, scratching the back of his head, while he took stock of the remains. He picked up a stick and tapped the body on the shoulder; the flesh sounded like leather. He turned it 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, leant 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. The old man caught sight of a black bottle in the grass, close beside the corpse. This set him thinking. Presently he knelt down and examined the soles of the dead man's blucher boots, and then, rising with an air of conviction, exclaimed: "Brummy! by gosh!--busted up at last!

"I tole yer so, Brummy," he said impressively, addressing the corpse. "I allers told yer as how it 'ud be--an' here y'are, you thundering jump-up cuss-o'-God fool. Yer cud earn more'n any man in the colony, but yer'd lush it all away. I allers sed as how it 'ud end, an' now yer kin see fur y'self.

"I spect yer was a-comin' t' me t' get fixt up an' set straight agin; then yer was a-goin' to swear off, same as yer 'allers did; an' here y'are, an' now I expect I'll have t' fix yer up for the last time an' make yer decent, for 'twon't do t' leave yer alyin' out here like a dead sheep."

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

"Well, this gits me," exclaimed the old man; "me luck's in, this Christmas, an' no mistake. He must 'a' got the jams early in his spree, or he wouldn't be a-making for me with near a bottleful left. Howsomenever, here goes."

Looking round, his eyes lit up with satisfaction as he saw some bits of bark which had been left by a party of strippers who had been getting bark there for the stations. He picked up two pieces, one about four and

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:23 AM

Comment [5]: Imagery, describing the location. Use of "spur" returns to negative description of landscape - spikey

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:25 AM

Comment [6]: Disturbing image of old man playing with bones, like a Dr or undertaker suggests perversion of BU that has taken place after long isolation.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:26 AM

Comment [7]: Description of landscape, names plant species

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:33 AM

Comment [8]: Goanna imagery

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:27 AM

Comment [9]: Makes reference to grotesque nature of corpse, but also to its fascinating nature by calling it a "mummy"

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:29 AM

Comment [10]: Grotesque imagery, similes make reference to items within the BU's experiences

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 10:59 AM

Comment [11]: Items text to Corpse reveal identity

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:31 AM

Comment [12]: Direct dialogue using phonetic spelling and Australian colloquialism allows reader to hear and understand BU's shock and anger at realising his friend is dead

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.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 11:00 AM

Comment [13]: Detailed description allows the audience to visualise how the stretcher was made. Technical description makes the process sound official, almost professional

"Come on, Brummy," he said, in a softer tone than usual, "ye ain't as bad as yer might be, considerin' as it must be three good months since yer slipped yer wind. I spects it was the rum as preserved yer. It was the death of yer when yer was alive, an' now yer dead, it preserves yer like--like a mummy."

Then he placed the other strip on top, with the hollow side downwards--thus sandwiching the defunct between the two pieces--removed the saddle-strap, which he wore for a belt, and buckled it round one end, while he tried to think of something with which to tie up the other.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:33 AM

Comment [14]: Again describes how stretcher was produced

"I can't take any more strips off my shirt," he said, critically examining the skirts of the old blue overshirt he wore. "I might get a strip or two more off, but it's short enough already. Let's see; how long have I been a-wearin' of that shirt; oh, I remember, I bought it jist two days afore Five Bob was pupped. I can't afford a new shirt jist yet; howsomenever, seein' it's Brummy, I'll jist borrow a couple more strips and sew 'em on agen when I 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, he started for home.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:37 AM

Comment [15]: Amusing (possibly disturbing image) of BU carrying body in make shift bark stretcher, a bag of bones and a bottle of rum, stopping to take a drink

"I ain't a-spendin' sech a dull Christmas arter all," he reflected, as he plodded on; but he had not walked above a hundred yards when he saw a black goanna sidling into the grass.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:33 AM

Comment [16]: Threatening Goanna imagery

"That's another of them theer dang things!" he exclaimed. "That's two I've seed this mornin'."

Presently he remarked: "Yer don't smell none too sweet, Brummy. It must 'a' been jist about the middle of shearin' when yer pegged out. I wonder who got yer last cheque. Shool theer's another black goanner--theer must be a flock of 'em."

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

"The thunderin' jumt-up bones is all skew-whift," he said. "'Ole on, Brummy, an' 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 goanna gliding off sideways, with its long snaky neck turned towards him.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:34 AM

Comment [17]: Threatening goanna imagery

This puzzled the shepherd considerably, the strangest part of it being that Five Bob wouldn't touch the reptile, but slunk off with his tail down when ordered to "sick 'em."

"Theer's sothin' comic about them theer goanners," said the old man at last. "I've seed swarms of grasshoppers an' big mobs of kangaroos, but dang me if ever I seed a flock of black goanners afore!"

On reaching the hut the old man dumped the corpse 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, and, consequently, that individual fell forward and struck him a violent blow on the shoulder with the iron toes of his blucher boots.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:39 AM

Comment [18]: Foreshadowing the fear/ threat the body will pose to the BU. Here it hits him while he is not looking and frightens him

The shock sobered him. He sprang a good yard, instinctively hitching up his moleskins in preparation for flight; but a backward glance revealed to him the true cause of this supposed 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 yer 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 that gleamed on him from those empty sockets; his nerves received a shock, and it was some time before he recovered himself sufficiently to speak.

"Now, look a-here, Brummy," said he, shaking his finger severely at the delinquent, "I don't want to pick a row with yer; I'd do as much for yer an' more than any other man, an' well yer knows it; but if yer starts playin' any of yer jumpt-up pranktical jokes on me, and a-scarin' of me after a-humpin' of yer 'ome, by the 'oly frost I'll kick yer to jim-rags, so I will."

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 have, as he said, a snooze.

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

He lit a slush-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 overhead, and put the pot down on the table with a slam that spilled some of the precious liquor.

Five Bob whimpered, and the old shepherd, though used to the weird and dismal, as one living alone in the bush must necessarily be, felt the icy breath of fear at his heart.

He reached hastily for his old shot-gun, and went out to investigate. He walked round the but several times and examined the roof on all sides, but saw nothing. Brummy appeared to be in the same position.

At last, persuading himself that the noise was caused by possums or the wind, the old man went inside, boiled his 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 mysterious sound overhead, but, though he rose and examined the roof on each occasion by the light of the rising moon, he 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 short distance from the hut, with his gun laid in readiness across his knee.

After watching for about an hour, he saw a black object coming over the ridge-pole. He grabbed his gun and fired. The thing disappeared. He ran round to the other side of the hut, and there was a great black goanna in violent convulsions on the ground.

Then the old man saw it all. "The thunderin' jumpt-up thing has been a-havin' o' me," he exclaimed. "The same cuss-o'-God wretch has a-follered me 'ome, an' has been a-havin' its Christmas dinner off of Brummy, an' a-hauntin' o' me into the bargain, the jumpt-up tinker!"

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 the body the next afternoon, reflecting that the authorities could disinter it for inquest if they pleased.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:41 AM
Comment [19]: 2nd shock from body. Eerie image of "awful scrutiny from eyeless sockets"

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:41 AM
Comment [20]: Ridiculous image of BU speaking to corpse as if alive and threatening him

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:43 AM
Comment [21]: Spilling alcohol

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:45 AM
Comment [22]: Shows link between lifestyle and landscape

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:44 AM
Comment [23]: Personification of fear

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:43 AM
Comment [24]: Description of actions suggest the fear unusually experienced by BU

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:46 AM
Comment [25]: Reassuring actions

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:47 AM
Comment [26]: Goanna's on the roof

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:47 AM
Comment [27]: Threat of goanna realised

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

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:48 AM
Comment [28]: Methodical description of preparation places BU in the role of an official physician

"That 'minds me," he said. "I never rightly knowed Brummy's religion, blest if ever I did. Howsomenever, there's one thing sartin--none o' them theer pianer-fingered parsons is a-goin' ter take the trouble ter travel out inter this God-forgotten part to hold sarvice over him, seein' as how his last cheque's blued. But, as I've got the fun'ral arrangements all in me own hands, I'll do jestice to it, and see that Brummy has a good comfortable buryin'--and more's unpossible."

"It's time yer turned in, Brum," he said, lifting the body down.

He carried it to the grave and dropped it into one corner like a post. He arranged the bark so as to cover the face, and, by means of a piece of clothes-line, lowered the body to a horizontal position. Then he threw in an armful of gum-leaves, and then, very reluctantly, took the shovel and dropped in a few shovelfuls of earth.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:51 AM
Comment [29]: His actions somewhat mirror funeral rites, but have been change to use Australian items (washing line and gum leaves) In this environment, old rituals seem out of place

"An' this is the last of Brummy," he said, leaning on his spade and looking away over the tops of the ragged gums on the distant range.

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

"Arter all," he murmured sadly, "arter all--it were Brummy.

"Brummy," he said at last. "It's all over now; nothin' matters now--nothin' didn't ever matter, nor--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 a-comin'."

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:53 AM
Comment [30]: Threat of living in dangerous outback, said in BU's voice highlights the danger evident here, and the inevitability of death

He threw in some more earth.

"Yer don't remember, Brummy, an' mebbe yer don't want to remember-- _I_ don't want to remember--but--well, but, yer see that's where yer got the pull on me."

He shovelled in some more earth and paused again.

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

"Theer oughter be somethin' sed," muttered the old man; "'tain't right to put 'im under like a dog. Theer oughter be some sort o' sarmin." He sighed heavily in the listening silence that followed this remark and proceeded with his work. He 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." As he laid the tools quietly aside, and stood at the head of the grave, he was evidently trying to remember the something that ought to be said. He removed his hat, placed it carefully on the grass, held his 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--an'--an' in hopes of a great an' gerlorious rassaraction!"

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:57 AM
Comment [31]: BU's serious attempt to conduct a religious ceremony is shown through his gestures, however his mispronunciation of biblical words and the dogs disturbance suggests that such rituals are irrelevant and far removed from the realities of life facing the BU.

He sat down on a log near by, rested his elbows on his knees and passed his hand wearily over his forehead--but only as one who was tired and felt the heat; and presently he rose, took up the tools, and walked back to the hut.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 9:58 AM
Comment [32]: Initial phrase suggests BU's is affected by the passing of his friend, however it is back to business as usual as he is only affected by the weather

And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush--the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird.

Ms Galea 4/3/2014 10:01 AM
Comment [33]: Ending statement summarises the effect of the landscape on the lifestyle of its occupants. Its danger challenges its occupants and alters their behaviour to become unconventional and "weird" necessary for survival.