

THE BUSH TRACK

“God, this is an awful bloody track. No shade except for that miserable looking dead tree up ahead. And I’ve still got about ten miles to go to the next waterhole.” The old man set his eyes on the distant horizon and resumed his steady way. The weight of the swag on his back caused him to hunch his shoulders and lean forward.

He passed the dead tree, knowing it would be a waste of time to find any shade under it, but noticed a crow perched up in its branches. He was sure it was the same one that had been keeping him company for some days. He and the crow had been having conversations, and while the crow’s contribution was monosyllabic, his tended toward the more profane. “To be honest,” he mumbled to himself, “I think that black so and so’s been keeping me going.” The sight of a line of trees on the horizon caused him to quicken his step. He mumbled something more to the crow, which also took flight, thinking this was where they parted company.

Making the shelter of the trees, he was pleased to note the waterhole was full, and after making a little fire he made his way down to the water, where he filled his billy and washed the sweat and dirt from his face and arms. “I’ll have a good bogie after a cuppa and a smoke,” he said to himself. “There’s nothing like a good brew and a smoke at the end of the day.” With the ingredients for a damper mixed and formed, he put this into the coals to cook. And then he returned to the waterhole for his promised bath.

Later that evening, settling down on his swag with his back to a tree, he thought back to his life on the track.

All the poets and writers romanticised this type of life, but he knew it was far from that; long, hot days, dry creeks, and sparse rations were usually the norm. So very different from the writer’s imagination. “But why do I do it?” he’d long wondered. It had been a hard day, the heat and the distance seemed to be taking a lot more out of him lately. “Well, I suppose I’m not as young as I used to be,” he muttered, lifting the quart pot to his lips and taking a long drink of the hot black tea. “Ahh, that’s better. Nothing like a good drop of tea to hit the spot.” And as he was placing this back on the ground, he heard a noise that caused him to look up, and there was the crow again. He was sure it was the same one. It was just above him, sitting on a branch, watching him. “Ok,” the old man said, “I’ll save some of the damper for you.” The crow lifted its head at the sound of his voice, then settled down, as if intending to stay for the night.

The old man thought about that crow. He usually didn't like them much. However, lately, he'd found himself looking for it every morning, making sure it was still there, and while he cursed it during the day as it followed him along the bush track, its loud cawing spurred him on. So it was a love/hate relationship he'd developed with the crow. But now he somehow felt glad it was there above him.

Being comfortable, he began reminiscing about his early years as a young man brought up in a small country town, with two younger siblings, and a father who was away from home most of the year following the shearing teams, picking up other work when the sheds cut out. The children were expected to help around the house so a small garden kept them in fresh vegetables. Goats provided milk and meat, and poultry provided eggs. His mother, ever conscious of her own lack of education, made sure they all went to the small one teacher school. This is where he discovered a love of books. And even now, he carried a couple of old favourites with him.

With school days behind him and a father now unable to work any more, it had fallen to him to help provide for the family. Being a willing worker, he didn't have much trouble finding work in the district, and with such a close-knit family, it never occurred to him to move away from home and venture farther afield. His younger siblings were still at school and he was needed. So the years passed. His father died, his siblings both finished their education and found work around the district, and finally, he made the decision he could now move out into the world. But just as he was contemplating this, war broke out, and along with other young men from the district, he enlisted.

Months of training followed, before these young soldiers finally boarded a ship and set sail to the Middle East. His first taste of action was against Turkish forces in Palestine. Then it was on to Gallipoli. Then came the western front. The thought of this could still elicit a shudder in him; what they went through, the freezing cold, the wet, the gas attacks, and the constant artillery bombardment. He often wondered how he managed to survive. Seeming like long years, so long ago.

He recalled the return trip home, and the first sight of the Western Australian coastline, the warmth of the sun, and such clear skies; all so different from the grey skies of Europe. Then arriving in Sydney where a mate talked him in to staying with him and looking for work together. But after a while, the rush of the city, the crowds, the traffic, got to him,

and he longed to return to the relative quiet of the bush. Telegraphing his brother that he was coming home, he took a train, and later a mail coach, homeward bound.

After four years away he'd expected to see some changes, but to his surprise, nothing much was different at all, apart from there being more motorcars on the roads. His brother had a job with the town council and was engaged to be married. His sister was working at the local grocer shop and was being courted by the owner's son. He managed to find some work around the district, but for some reason, and maybe because he was the one who'd changed, he just couldn't seem to settle down, and so the time came when he left again. And that began his many, many years of roaming around the country, picking up work whenever and wherever he could, never staying long in one place.

But for some time now, feeling his age, the old swaggie felt an urge to go home again, back to that little country town. And this is where he was headed, and would arrive, after maybe a couple more days on the track. Anticipating that, the old man closed his eyes and settled into his swag, bidding the crow good night.

The antics of the crow in the morning aroused the curiosity of two stockmen as they were riding through the paddock. "I've seen crows do some silly things," one said, "but never like this." The other stockman peered intently. "It's almost as if he's trying to tell us something," he replied. "He keeps flying back and forth from that patch of scrub to us. Won't hurt to go have a look." Turning their horses toward the patch of scrub, they rode toward the crow, which sat quietly on a limb and watched them.

And there they found the old man, still in his swag. A quick check for signs of life had one man galloping off to get some help. The other covered the old swaggie up, then sat down to wait. "Is this what you were trying to tell us?" he said to the crow. The crow gave a squawk, as if in reply, and patiently waited with him.