

GRANDPA CANE

Today is the 22nd of June. This morning at breakfast Grandpa made a statement. Which is rare for him, for at this time of day he usually prefers to remain silent. When he came to the table he sat for a few moments looking at his bowl of porridge (he has porridge every morning without fail, for he holds fervently that this daily habit is a concomitant of acute brain power). Then he scooped up an overloaded spoonful, and with an unusually loud slurp, pushed it into his waiting mouth, leaving dangling fragments of porridge on his wide drooping moustache. Filling another spoonful and holding it poised half way to his mouth, he spoke. 'It's the winter solstice again. The shortest day of the year. Well we're going over the hump now and the days will soon be getting longer and warmer. Not much difference in length at first, but gradually it'll gain a little each day.'

As far as I can remember back, even before I started school, Grandpa made this same breakfast time statement every year on the 22nd of June. And this wasn't all. He made a similarly appropriate statement for the summer solstice every year on the 22nd of December – this too while he was eating his porridge. This statement went: 'It's the summer solstice again – the longest day of the year. Gradually – very very gradually, I might add – the days will get a little shorter, till at last you will notice they are getting cooler as well.'

Apart from his observations of the solstices, Grandpa never made any notable utterances at breakfast time, except once, when he shocked all those present by a vehement, out-of-the-blue outburst of vulgarity (notable, because he consistently condemned such usage in the sanctuary of the table). My father, who had been having a lively discussion with a relative from the city, had just made a rather dogmatic political remark. A rush of blood reddened Grandpa's cheeks, his lips trembled, and then he exploded. 'That's just a lot of bloody bullshit! Bullshit, I say! Bullshit! Bullshit!' He hammered a heavy fist on the table. Suddenly, realising with disgust what he'd been saying, he took a big mouthful of boiling hot tea, which he immediately spewed out into his empty porridge bowl and on the table cloth. 'Sorry about that,' he said miserably, 'but I won't retract my remarks.'

Grandpa was born on a Queensland canefield and has never lived anywhere else. He is quite a character, old Grandpa, and is widely known in nearby districts for his stubbornness, dry humour, and his passion for work. Because of his tirelessness he became known, in his older years, as Grandpa Cane, an appellation he readily accepted with some pride. 'He'll never give up,' people said. 'He has an engine inside him. He'll work forever.'

'A man never needs to give up work,' Grandpa says. 'All he needs is plenty of good tucker and the knowledge that work is the best medicine, and it keeps you feeling young and fit. And you need to love what you're doing.'

At this point he pauses, and waits expectantly for someone to make a comment. That one is usually me. 'What made you feel this way Grandpa?'

He always takes the cue perfectly. 'Ah!' he says, his face brightening. (Grandpa has a big wide face, accentuated by protruding ears.) 'Now, that's an interesting point. When I was a lad there were still Kanakas working in the canefields. Often I used to watch them work. Something about them fascinated me. One fellow among them interested me more than any others. He was known as Jimmy Crash. He wasn't such a big bloke, but he was thick and solid. In action he was a pretty sight, with the muscles in his arms and legs rippling and flowing like music. Work wasn't drudgery to him — it was performing something that was beautiful, and the happiest times in his life was when he was in action. You could easily tell he was happy, because he was always singing a rich haunting tune. You know that tune got into me and I used to find myself humming it — and for that matter I still hum it. It's in my system now.'

Again he pauses, waiting for a comment. (Once, when he was telling a story to me, he paused in like manner, but I had something on my mind and I forgot to comment. He stewed there a while and suddenly he blasted out, 'Damn it all boy! Don't you want to hear the rest of the story?' Now I'm always on my guard.) I wait with my reply. 'Sounds like Jimmy Crash was a terrific guy. Grandpa, would I be right in saying he was your inspiration?'

'You'd be more than right Roger my boy — you'd be dead on,' Grandpa goes on affably. (It made him feel good when you showed him you were listening.) 'At that time I was a bit lazy and used to dodge work if I could. Knowing Jimmy Crash made

me feel a rather miserable lout. I was plain ashamed of myself. Early one morning I went down to where Jimmy was cutting cane. His back was bent low and he was singing with great zest. He looked up and waved to me without stopping work. It was right at that moment that I made up my mind. I would take the same attitude to work as Jimmy did. That same morning I started putting that resolve into effect — even down to the singing. And that decision has been valid ever since, and it will remain so.' Grandpa pauses again for a few moments, and then with the crash of a fist into a palm, utters his final pronouncement as usual: 'So that is that.'

I had heard that story many times before, but somehow it never bored me. Grandpa recounted it with a native sincerity, and I do believe it is truth.

On my fifteenth birthday Grandpa surprised us all when he told a yarn no one had ever heard before. This was unusual. We were sitting on the verandah in the evening, just before tea time. He lit his bent-stem pipe and peered through the drifting wreaths of smoke at the ripening canefields stretching away in front of us. (This was a sign I knew so well.) 'I was about twenty at the time,' he said, taking the pipe from his mouth and laying it beside the old tobacco tin on the wide armrest of his squatter's chair, 'and we were working at the foot of Howling Hill, preparing a new piece of land for planting cane. It was fairly early in the morning, and with a south-easterly breeze fanning us, the conditions for working were good. Once when I looked up to take a bit of a breather I saw a swagman coming towards us from the road, a strong looking fellow walking with a quick step. He carried a large swag, and another little pack as well.

"Morning, men," he said as he came up to us. He held up a bulging paper bag. "A kind li'l lady up the road give me a nice bag o' tucker. D'ya mind if I sit down 'ere an' eat it while I watch youse work?"

'My father glanced at him and said, "All right, but don't disturb us."

'The swaggie sat on the ground, drew big pieces of food from the bag, and ate greedily. "I was starvin' 'ungry," he said. "The old guts was startin' to sing out real loud."

'I was fascinated by the fellow, watching him closely. He had a thin cheeky face, with the top lip curled up. His face was clean-shaven. This struck me as odd for a swaggie.'

Grandpa paused. I was anxious for him to keep going. ‘Tell us everything the swagman said Grandpa,’ I said. ‘This bloke sounds interesting.’

But Grandpa wasn’t in a hurry. He lit his pipe and with several quick puffs nearly obscured his head in smoke. Presently he laid his pipe on the armrest of the chair beside the tobacco tin. He was then ready to continue his story. ‘That swaggie said plenty. I said he looked cheeky. Well, when he had eaten several gluttonous mouthfuls and started talking, his insolence showed up.

‘“Listen youse guys,” he called out in a loud rasping voice, “d’youse know what I’ve been thinkin’ while I’ve been watchin’ youse sloggin’ away. Well I’ll tell ya. I reckons yousa lotta bloody idiots. Work’s got nothin’ to commend it. I’ve been observin’ people workin’ over the years (just like I’m observin’ youse ganders now) an’ on reflectin’ an’ meditat’in’ on it I’ve come to the sober an’ studied conclusion that workin’ ’as never ever done nothin’ for no one. There! I’m givin’ yer me opinion straight!”

‘We all kept working and didn’t answer him, though Jock Massey, I saw, gave him a scowling glance. The swaggie seemed to look a bit deflated when he failed to draw a few return shots. Then he decided to try again. “So now youse don’t want to do no talkin’ ’ey?” he blasted. “Well I’ll tell ya some more what I’m thinkin’. Ya just a pack of snobby bastards, too stuck up an’ conceited t’speak to ya fella man. A pack of bloody dingoes – that’s what y’are. An’ I’ll tell ya more. Youse a slimy lot – so slimy that a bloke’s eyes slide orf ya. I’ll tell ya somethin’ else ya mightn’t know and won’t want to ’ear –” He was interrupted by Jock Massey, who with flashing eyes suddenly darted towards him. The swagman jumped up in panic, grabbed his swags and dashed off. Jock picked up the abandoned bag of food and gave chase. When he got close to the fugitive he let fly with the food bag, which made violent contact with the swaggie, knocking his hat off and bursting into fragments on his head like a bomb. Jock gave up the chase and came back panting. We all burst out laughing, including Jock, when we saw the humour of the incident.

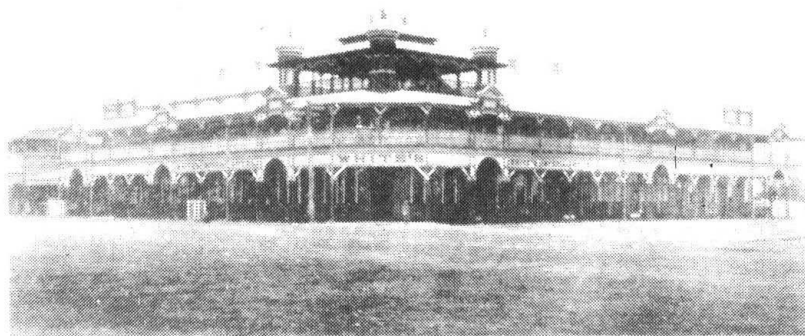
‘That was the last we saw of him but not the last we heard about him. Word spread around that he had called at several other cane farms in the district, where he had behaved in a

similar manner. After a few weeks the real truth about the fellow came out. He was a sacked professor who disguised himself as a swagman to cover up his crimes. Further up north the police arrested him and charged him with defrauding seven different people over a period of three months.'

Grandpa lit his pipe again and gazed thoughtfully over the canefields. I couldn't resist the urge to make a comment. 'That was a good story Grandpa. But one thing puzzles me. Why hadn't you ever told that story before?'

'Why? Because I saved it for your fifteenth birthday. And there is still another story I've got saved up, and it's even better than the one I've just told.'

Looking back, I see that it was Grandpa Cane who taught me that rare is valuable, when it comes to the good things in life.



White's Imperial Hotel, Longreach, Q. 1909

