

## DAL STIVENS

### THE WORLD'S GREATEST PAINTER

Dabby Dawson was the smartest thing with a paint brush the outback of Australia or anywhere else ever produced. If anything he was too smart.

He was a trimmer at house painting. His brush went so fast he had to put ice in the handle to stop the paint from blistering. Some blokes claim they can handle striped paint in half-inch bands but Dabby could slap out a Royal Stuart tartan from the one tin. And he was the only man in the world who could paint a chameleon which would change colour when you moved it about.

None of the old-timers agree on what Dabby looked like. Some say he was as big as a retired wrestler; others, again, that he was as thin as a railway refreshment room sandwich. The truth was that Dabby used his paints on himself and had to copy an early photograph when he visited his mother.

His mother asked him to do something about the tom cats that came wailing round after their tabby. Dabby got to work on an old splintery log a good half mile from the house and slapped a lovesick little tabby on it. A lot of people stroked it by mistake and the toms didn't wake up until they had copped a crop of splinters where it hurt most.

A new policeman at Dead Wombat Creek said something which Dabby reckoned was a reflection on his manhood. The John Dunn was following the road round the creek on his motor cycle one day and the next thing he was thirty feet out in the water, with the cycle nose diving under him. Dabby could paint on all surfaces or none at all, such as air. What he'd done was to paint a road out over the water and blot out the real road with trees and rocks. While the cop was swallowing the thick creek water, Dabby wiped out his fake road, trees and rocks.

The copper could prove nothing but he made Dead Wombat Creek a bit too hot for Dabby who lit off for Sydney. Dabby reckoned he was going to paint the Mayor. He marched up the Town Hall steps and told the flunkeys to announce him. Half a day later, after Dabby had painted him a blonde, one of the flunkeys took the message in.

"We don't want any tramps in this fine Town Hall," said the Mayor and whistled for all the flunkeys. "Take him and throw him down the stairs. If he's still conscious or in one piece, pick him up and chuck him down again."

Dabby came to three hours later in a cell, having been lumbered as a drunk. He did a week because the beak couldn't see any difference between a drunk or vagabond and an artist, though Dabby tried to explain it to him.

The day Dabby got out the Mayor was taking the salute from the troops. Dabby sneaked up on the platform where the Mayor had to stand later and slapped his brush about and then he daubed himself with his invisible paint and waited in the passage outside His Worship's office.

When the Mayor leaves his office Dabby goes to work with his swiftest and softest touch and paints a face on the back of the Mayor's head and hands like the Mayor's on the back of his robes. The crowd isn't pleased when it sees what it reckons is the Mayor climbing up some steps and telling people with his hands to do something rude and difficult. People boo and yell and some make the gesture back before the Mayor's offsideers take a tumble.

The Mayor rips the coat off, orders the police to bring back that painting vagabond, dead or alive, and apologizes to the crowd. He starts to get on with the business but Dabby hasn't finished with him. The Mayor steps to the front of the platform, puts his foot on a plank Dabby has painted in space and tries to rest a paw on a rail that isn't one. He just misses a couple of bayonets on the way down.

They carry the Mayor back to his office and help him into what they reckoned was his chair. They pick him up from the floor and dump him on what they were certain was a couch. The steps they try to cart the unconscious Mayor down are daubed in space, too. The Mayor was unnerved for months afterwards and used to feel every seat before he risked himself on it, in whatever room of the house it was.

After this Sydney got too hot for Dabby and he shot off to Melbourne, having heard that it was a cultured city where an artist would be appreciated. He hunted out the Mayor who was week-ending at his country estate.

The Mayor of Melbourne didn't have him thrown down the steps. There were only two steps anyway and the fall wasn't worth the effort. Instead, he told the butler to sool the dogs on to Dabby who had to beat it.

The Mayor had a prize racing greyhound and hoped to win a gold cup with him. Before the big race Dabby nipped out to the course and painted tabby cats and greyhound bitches on fences and on the cactus borders. He used a couple of his special paints. The first was a delayed action one timed not to show until just before the race; the other was a

paint that kept fading and coming back.

The racing dogs did their blocks when they saw all those tabbies and bitches, appearing and re-appearing, racing away and stopping, spitting and looking inviting. They couldn't make up their minds which would be the most fun to chase. It messed the race up and some of the dogs, including the Mayor's, were never the same again, with nervous breakdowns and such like.

Dabby played a few more tricks on the Mayor and then suddenly gave it up and went to Adelaide. He must have been too heartbroken to care where he was going because he couldn't have expected much from Adelaide. The Mayor of Adelaide didn't have him thrown down the steps or call out the dogs. Instead, he gave Dabby what he reckoned was something useful to do.

"Young man, art should be enlisted in the cause of public morals", he said. "There is altogether too much petting in the parks at night, and you, young man, will employ the talents God gave you to frighten them into the well-lighted streets and ways of God." Here the Mayor's voice became stern. "If you don't, I shall have you arrested as a vagabond."

Dabby went to work in the parks and painted mad bulls, policemen, old women and men with holes where their noses ought to be, rain clouds, even puddles on the grass and bad-tempered snakes, without much success. Even the bits of broken glass, burrs and thistles he daubed next didn't seem to convince. Dabby might have lost his touch a bit but he was up against something tough.

After a time he gave the Mayor the slip and went to Brisbane. Here he seems to have painted Christmas cards. All his old skill was there but, true to his old form, he overdid it again. The snow scenes were so cold the blokes in the post office refused to handle them. The iceworks made Dabby an offer but he turned it down and headed off to Perth where he painted a big sign advertising somebody's cough mixture. He put in rain and people huddling under umbrellas. The whole of Perth caught colds, the houses within a quarter of a mile grew moss on the side nearest the sign and the fire brigade was called out continually to pump out cellars.

To set things right, Dabby painted over it a sunny scene with cows and trees. For 100 miles around stud bulls broke their fences, people in Perth had to wear dark glasses, the river started drying up, and the trees grew 150 feet out of the top of the sign and would have kept on going if Dabby hadn't slapped a ringbark on their trunks.

After Perth Dabby seems to have gone to London and Paris. What

happened to him there must have been much the same because within a few years he turned up in central Australia where he got a job painting lakes in the sand deserts for a Sydney firm which hoped to sell yachts to the abos. Even here Dabby had to overdo it.

He got drunk one night to celebrate a successful experiment with a new kind of invisible paint he had slapped on himself and fell into one of his own lakes. He exhausted himself trying to swim and fell unconscious.

Dabby Dawson, the greatest painter Australia ever produced, died of thirst in his lake and less than 100 yards away from a couple of Aborigines who couldn't see him, of course, and who were too busy to hear him. They were trying to launch a yacht that kept flopping on its side and which they reckoned must be badly weighted in the keel.