

SENIOR FICTION

FIRST PRIZE WINNER: COLIN EDWARDS

OLD WHISKERS

Old Whiskers was tired. All day he'd been trudging along the coast, climbing around rocky points and headlands and ploughing his way through the stretches of soft, deep sand which lay between. To say nothing of the frequent mangrove swamps and tidal creeks which taxed his skinny old legs to their limits. Only one more headland to go and he would be in sight of his target for the day, his last camping site on the long tramp down to the small town where he picked up his pension cheques every six months or so. This campsite, the nearest to civilisation, was still the best part of a day's hard march from Cooktown. And it was nothing flash, only an old, square iron tank on its side, but at least it was waterproof even though it was always stinking hot in the tropic sun.

How it had come to be in that isolated spot no one knew, least of all Old Whiskers. Perhaps it had drifted ashore from some wreck, maybe from a ship torpedoed in the Coral Sea during World War II. Whatever its origins, years before he had stumbled upon it, half-filled with windblown sand and home to a colony of red-back spiders. To Whiskers seeking refuge from the lashing of a cyclone the spiders were barely a nuisance, soon to be dispatched. In the days that followed the cyclone Whiskers had cleaned out the sand and even started a small garden about a hundred yards further back in the bush where a small fresh-water spring surfaced.

Because of the work he had put into it Old Whiskers had claimed it for his own, along with half-a-dozen other campsites along the desolate coast which stretched northwards towards Cape York, sites which included a cave or two, a couple of tumbledown shacks and two old wrecks stranded high and dry by some long-forgotten cyclone. At each site he'd planted a gar-



den of sorts, thereby staking his claims. By the unwritten law of the beachcombers not one of the small band of old men who lived in solitude along the coast would think of intruding on those rights.

An invitation offered was something different. Even then it would be for a night or two only, and none of the "beach rats" would dream of overstaying the invitation which would have been ever-so grudgingly given.

Except, perhaps, Crazy Jenks, the most idle scrounger to be found along the coast.

Old Whiskers hitched his swag around to a fresh position on old, aching shoulders. Two billycans, one blackened and battered from a thousand brews, the other lidless, clattered together at the movement. Two grey frill-lizards scrambled out of the open billy and clawed their way over the swag to take up new positions on the battered straw hat shading the old man's face. Their weight, little though it was, tilted the brim down over Old Whisker's eyes.

"Awright! Awright! D'ya have t'get all upset just because I moved me swag?"

He pushed the hat back to a level position. With claws firmly gripping the straw the lizards stayed motionless. A third lizard, and then a fourth, emerged from some hidden recess in the old man's clothes to join their kind on the hat, long spikey tails drooping over the sad, ragged brim.

"Now watta you two wanta shift for?" the old man demanded, more to himself than to the lizards. "You were better off where ya were. What happens if ya fall orf? D'ya think I'm goin' t'stop t'pick ya up? Then ya've got another think comin', that's what!"

Old Whiskers picked his careful way around an outcrop of huge rocks, mumbling as he went. He wasn't even aware he was talking to himself; he'd been doing it for so many years that now it went entirely unnoticed. His pet lizards took no notice, either.

Old Whiskers climbed onto the last big rock that jutted out over the small beach running past his camp. The rusty tank was clearly visible, partly hidden by the clumps of hibiscus planted

years before and allowed to grow untrimmed ever since. A dozen tall palms cast lengthening shadows across the beach and down to the warm water.

He paused, appreciatively, to survey his small kingdom. A thin spiral of smoke caught his attention. His small, spare frame stiffened. He looked more closely at the scene before him. The sight of the open door set him muttering again at top speed.

“Stiffen the moggies, now who’d that be in me house? In me own house, mind you, and me goin’ t’use it, too. If its one of me friends I’ll have ’im. Fair dinkum, I’ll have the cow.” He paused for breath. “Since when did I tell any one of them they could use me house? Next thing they’ll be wantin’ t’use me toothbrush, or me blanket. I’ll give ’im the order of the boot, I will. ’Nd if ’e doesn’t clear out quick-smart I’ll sue th’ cow, that’s what I’ll do!”

Still talking loudly to himself he jumped down from the rock, all tiredness forgotten in the heat of his anger. Three of the four lizards catapulted onto the sand. Whiskers ignored them as he set off as fast as he could. The lizards scurried after him in swift darting runs that carried them along with amazing speed, frill-caped heads held high and thin rakes of tails leaving arrow-straight lines in the sand behind them.

After fifty yards or so Old Whiskers remembered them. He waited until they scuttled closer. Unceremoniously he scooped them up and thrust them inside his shirt. Then he hurried on.

He turned off the beach at the first of the palms, stepping off the sand on to a tough mat of wire grass. He went to step over a fallen branch and realised it was no piece of timber but the outstretched legs of a sleeper propped against the butt of the palm. Crazy Jenks – and dead to the world, a rasping, asthmatic snore coming from beneath his untidy beard.

Old Whiskers stopped and eyed him. Barefooted, he aimed a swift kick at the nearest thigh. And promptly wished he hadn’t, as he hopped around holding his damaged toes. “Oh! Oh! Oh!” he roared, “Now y’ve done it! Broken me flamin’ toes ya have!” He paused long enough to take another kick at the backside of the man already scrambling away on all fours. “Stand still, y’coot. Just stay where yer are ’nd I’ll give ya another belt on the backside to go on with!”

But Crazy wasn't that crazy. He managed to get clear and backed up against the side of the tank, holding a hand palm out in the sign of peace.

"Hold it, Whiskers, hold it! It's a fine how-de-do, being attacked like that without any warning. That's a fine way to be treating your guest, I don't think."

"Guest? Guest is it, now? 'nd who'd be inviting the likes of you to be sharing me house and home? 'Nd how long have ya been usin' it? Tell me that, Mister Crazy Jenks!"

Crazy gathered the shreds of his tattered dignity. "You. You invited me yourself."

Old Whiskers began to splutter but Crazy hurried on. "Yeh, you remember. It was the last time when we came in for our pensions and had that bit of a wing-ding behind China Joe's shop. Surely you remember. That's when you told me I could use this place."

Old Whiskers groaned inwardly. There was very little that he could remember about that night. Certainly the colossal hang-over was something he wanted to forget, even after all this time. But he couldn't recall issuing the invitation and he was too proud to argue the point. He changed the subject.

"You comin' or goin'?" he asked.

"Coming or going? Well, I've collected me pension, if that's what you mean."

"'Nd when are ya leavin', then?" Whiskers was very pointed.

Crazy Jenks looked away. "I don't know," he whined. "I've been crook in me guts so I reckon I'll have to stay until I'm feeling orright again. And besides, you invited me, remember."

Old Whiskers was stumped, and they both knew it. A man didn't go back on his given word, unless it was to a copper or a government bloke, even if he couldn't recall doing any inviting. The next time he got high, Old Whiskers silently vowed, he'd make darned certain he wouldn't mix whisky with his rum. Rum was good enough by itself.

He sighed deeply and walked towards the doorway. Crazy relaxed. So the old coot didn't remember anything about their last drinking spree. Crazy gained in confidence. If he played his cards right he'd be able to stay on for a few more days, at least until Old Whiskers got back from collecting his pension.

Crazy tried to be casual. "You going on t' Cooktown in the mornin'?"

Old Whiskers stopped in his tracks. He had been intending to get a pre-dawn start but now he was suspicious of Jenks. On the spur of the moment he decided to stay put until Crazy left. And for good measure he'd even stay an extra day or so just in case Crazy had the smart idea of doubling back to the camp while he was in Cooktown. He turned slowly.

"Nope. I'm going to rest up for a while. I'm not as young as I was, y'know. Besides, I'm in no hurry t' collect me pension."

This was a downright lie for he'd been hurrying the last several days. He was out of nearly everything except for salt, and he had a thirst that only China Joe could help him quench. But thirst or no thirst he'd just have to hang on. There would be food of sorts in the garden and he'd be able to get all the fish he wanted. It should only be for a day or so, two at the most, for the unwritten but accepted law of beach hospitality let a guest stay for two nights unless sickness or cyclones made it impossible to move on. Then Jenks would have to go. Old Whiskers would stay.

He pushed his way past the bag draped across the inside of the tank opening and went into the near darkness. The day's heat, trapped inside, was enough to make a strong man faint. Added to that the stench would have turned the strongest stomach. He eyed the general disorder, and his anger mounted. Half a dozen blowflies buzzed lazily and noisily around the food scraps which littered the bench serving as a table.

He swung around on Crazy, glaring.

"How long've ya been livin' here? The place is a flamin' pigsty. How long, eh?"

"It was like this when I got here. Someone else must've been living here. Yeah, that must've been it."

"How long've you been here, is what I asked. How long?" Whisker's voice rose.

"I told you, it must have been someone else. You know I wouldn't make any mess like that."

Whiskers snarled in disbelief. "Then why didn't ya clean it up when ya got here?"

"I was goin' to but I felt crook in me —"

"Yeah, in yer guts, y'told me that already."

"That's right. I felt crook and had to sit down for a bit. I just dozed off, like."

Old Whiskers didn't believe him but didn't bother to argue. He stepped back inside again, slammed his swag down into the cleanest corner and jarred his two billycans onto the bench. He caught the lizard still on the brim of his hat and dropped it into the open billy before fossicking inside his shirt for the others. He put them in with their mate, and then had second thoughts. He tipped the billy on its side and rapped the bottom smartly. Four startled lizards scuttled to the edges of the bench, beady eyes still, ready to drop to the floor, and safety, at the first hint of danger.

Old Whiskers set to work cleaning the place up, making the dust fly as he shook the tattered blanket and whacked at the floor with a loose-reed broom. He edged the food scraps into an old paper bag and dropped the chipped and dirty plates into a half-full bucket of water to soak before going outside.

Crazy was resting on the grass under the palmtree again but hastily scrambled to his feet as Old Whiskers approached.

"I was goin' to clean up, Whiskers. Honest I was."

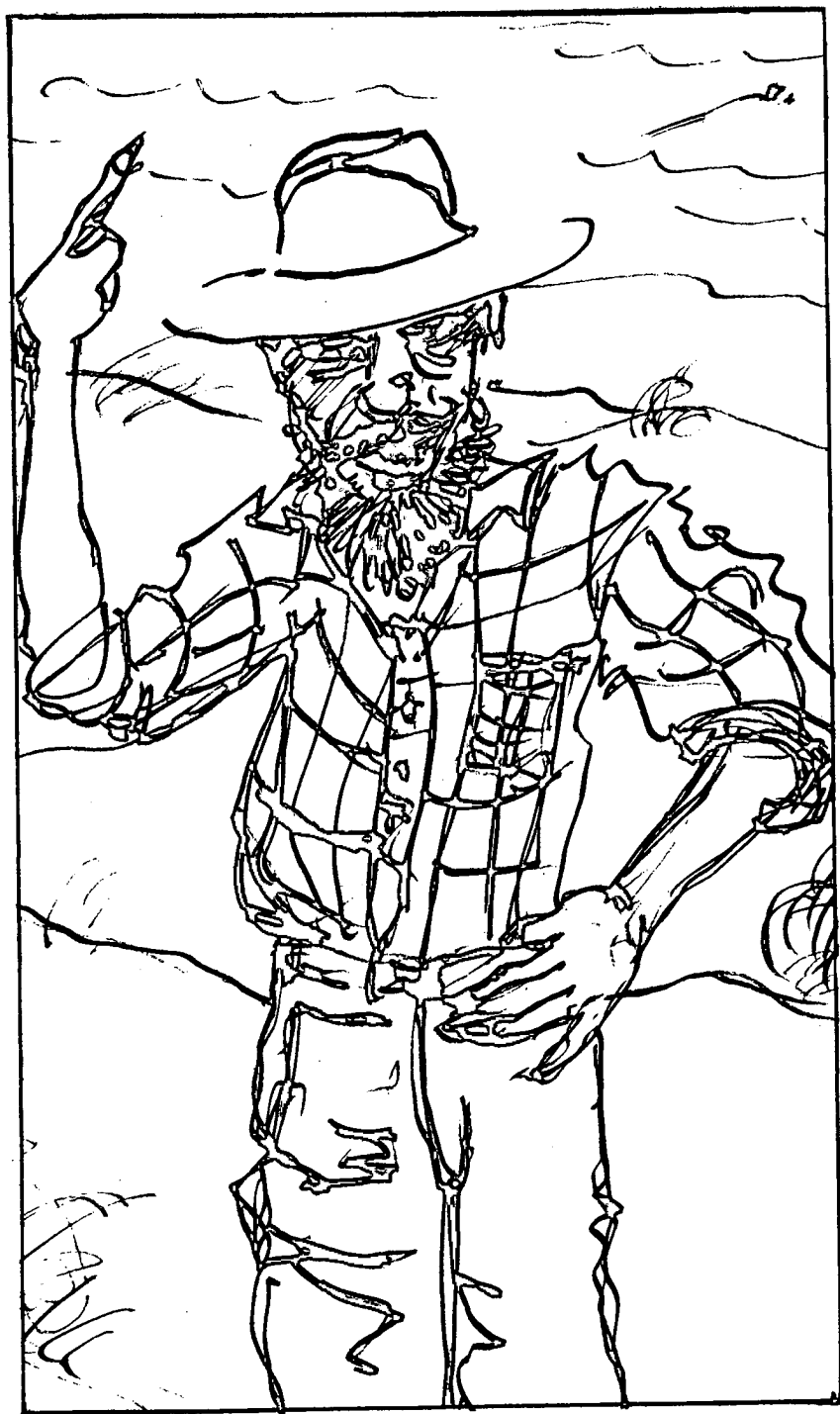
"But ya didn't, did ya? And now it's time to get somethin' to eat. You can eat whatever ya've brought from Cooktown but I'm goin' t'have to get somethin' from me garden. What've you got?"

"Only a tin of bully."

"Good, then ya won't mind if I put me veges with it 'nd we can 'ave a stew. Go 'nd knock a fire together. And get them dishes washed up while y're at it. I won't be long."

Crazy Jenks hurried inside, mumbling as he went. Old Whiskers headed for the brush-fenced garden patch behind the camp. There should be bananas and paw-paws if the darned flying foxes hadn't been around lately. Pineapples and sweet-potatoes there should be plenty of, and if he was lucky there might even be the odd choko and a couple of corncobs.

He climbed the brush fence and stopped in dismay. The small patch was completely ratted, even a bandicoot wouldn't be able to get a feed. The trees and bushes were stripped clean, and where the sweet potatoes should have been was just a pile of scattered dirt.



His anger boiled over at the sight of a dirty red handkerchief which he immediately recognised as belonging to Crazy Jenks. He pounced upon it and scrambled back over the fence. As fast as his old legs could carry him he set off for the camp, roaring at the top of his voice as he went.

“Come on out, Jenks, you thievin’ bastard. Come on out and I’ll murder you, yer potato pinching mongrel!”

Old Whiskers was some fifty yards from the tank when a wild-eyed figure burst from the doorway, a hastily rolled swag across his shoulders. In his right hand he carried a bottle of whisky and in his left a knife. Without stopping to find out where Old Whiskers might be Crazy fled towards the beach.

For a few strides Whiskers had the edge on him but then fear lent wings and Crazy began to draw away. He fairly flew over the last few yards of firm path but then the softer sand of the beach pulled his speed down abruptly. Old Whiskers, tiring badly, made a desperate flying tackle which would have done credit to a youngster a quarter of his age. He launched his skinny body up and forward – and missed. The thump of his landing and the spray of sand spurred Crazy to greater efforts. Clutching his precious bottle, and howling like a lonely dingo he pounded along the beach, heading for the rocky point and, he hoped, safety.

Old Whiskers lay exhausted, slowly recovering his breath. The sight of the wildly fleeing Jenks was too much for him. Not for years had Crazy moved so quickly – unless it was to snatch someone’s momentarily unguarded drink. And here he was, skinny arms flailing wildly, scrawny legs with their great knobbly knees, pounding up and down like pistons as he tried desperately to put as much distance as possible between himself and Old Whiskers.

A tremor shook Whiskers, then another and another, until soon he was racked with laughter bordering on hysteria. He laughed until he cried and his tired, aching muscles could take no more. He pushed himself upright, wiping his streaming cheeks with the handkerchief that belonged to Crazy. Then he shook his fist at the figure disappearing among the far jumble of rocks.

“Orlright you thievin’ old cow. We were goin’ ta have meat ’n vege stew for tea, but seein’ as y’ve already had me veges I reckon its only fair that I can ’ave your meat!”