

A HAPPY ALTERNATIVE.

by Stefan Von Kotze

A thin stream of water was trickling down the gigantic creek bed where the floods of ages had hewn and ground their way through the mountainside. Huge gray granite boulders, shaped into fantastic forms, and polished with the friction of the travelling pebbles, lined the watercourse. Here and there a grim stone Titan was rearing his body in naked defiance right in the middle of the creek, and behind the shelter of his bared breast a shivering colony of stunted ti-trees trailed their branches on the sand.

The surrounding hills, covered sparsely only with withered grass and dwarfed ironbarks, effectively closed out the horizon. On a tiny flat of "made" ground a very grimy looking bark humpy leant abjectly on the support of innumerable forks and prop sticks. A white band winding along the creek bed, carefully evading every rock and crevice, widening into three or more parallels on the level country, and squeezing into the smallest possible compass as it crawled up a steep pinch, constituted the main road between the township of Possum Hills tin mines and the mining camps lower down.

The humpy stood right on the road. It was called the Six-mile, and the men from further beyond, coming and going for their stores and salt beer, used to call in for a chat and a rest.

Possum Hills had been one of the best alluvial fields on the great Northern coastal range. But the shallow ground was worked out, and there were no deep leads. The low price of tin and the poverty of the wash had driven most of the population away in search of fresh pastures. But every rush will leave a residuum of fossickers on a field, long after it has ceased to be payable. And so, while on the whole Possum Hills was falling asleep again after the rude shock of its first awakening, ten years ago, a number of veterans, contemptuously described as "lifers," remained to overhaul the takings and prospect for stray patches that might have been overlooked in better days.

One of these conservative gentlemen was the inhabitant of Six-mile Hut. He was called "Slogger." Whether that was his original name is quite an irrelevant question. Most natures adapt themselves to their baptismal appellation; for the few exceptions, however, that go to intensify the rule, the eternal fitness of things demands that the name be adapted to the nature.

Therefore he was called Slogger. There was an air of dogged, unreasonable determination about the man that would have pushed him to the front in many walks of life, as a politician for instance, or a bum-bailiff. But he chose neither of these avocations. Circumstance made the selection for him. And circumstance made him a fossicker.

But even here his gifts had a chance to shine. For over eight years he had lived in this same humpy and worked the most poverty-stricken piece of beach on the whole field, tenaciously refusing to shift. He had his own opinions on the subject of tin-mining, and no amount of argument could wean him of the faith that he would strike it rich one of these days.

"You'll have to strike it mighty rich, too," opined one of his critics. "Why, there's scarcely a square yard without a pot-hole in it. There's no room for a decent patch. Tin ain't gold!"

"No," Slogger thoughtfully agreed. "Tin ain't gold. But I'll strike it! You just wait!"

And the other would give up hopelessly, and slinging his week's rations over his shoulder, continue on his way home. It was no use talking sense to such a man! Why, he daily outraged all precedents of up-to-date stream-tinning by going to work with his boots on, and wearing long trousers instead of knickers.

And it was whispered that he had even gone so far as to purchase a mineral licence, an unheard of proceeding in the history of Possum Hills.

But notwithstanding all these eccentricities on the part of Slogger, his homestead remained the popular half-way house, and his visitors, especially on Saturdays and Sundays, were numerous. And now and then the storekeeper would curse and yell his way past at the tail of a team of loaded packhorses, and have a yarn and a pannikin of tea, and leave an illustrated paper or two. And though the latter were of ancient date, they added considerably to the attractions of the Six-mile.

It was on a Sunday afternoon, during a very dry season, when there was little water for work, that Slogger first propounded his great purpose. Half-a-dozen old men were sitting about in front of the humpy, on the clumsy logs worn shiny with long usage. Loads of flour and beef were lying promiscuously on the ground, guarded by half-a-dozen assorted mongrels that snarled viciously at each other, and sniffed greedily at the bags, while their owners thoughtfully scraped out their pipe-bowls.

They were talking about Slogger's dog. That valuable animal had been coaxed away by some dingoes the night before and torn to pieces. And Slogger was inconsolable. He railed at Providence and the Divisional Board, he cursed his natal day, and the metal market, and professed an utter weariness of life.

"I'm getting about full up of it," he remarked.

The company did not seem surprised at that.

"Blanky, blasted, full up!" emphasised Slogger.

"And there never was any tin in that there beach," one of the assembly ventured to assert.

Slogger smiled indulgently, "Now, you just come and look at this," he said, rising majestically and marching into his hut.

"Come here," he shouted; "all of you! You think you know a lot. But who's right this time?"

And he pointed triumphantly to a symmetrical stack of canvas bags, crammed tight with the heavy metal.

"By jabers! Ten – thirteen – twenty – why, there's more'n a ton there!"

"More'n a ton? I should snigger! Twenty-five hundred-weight and a half! Got in a single week. What do you say now?"

They didn't say anything. They trooped dazedly back to their seats, and began scraping their pipes again, while Slogger minutely explained how, when, and where he had found the right pocket behind a huge boulder in the top-end of the beach.

"And I bet yous there's any 'mount more patches about there!"

No one dared to contradict in the face of such evidence. So Slogger continued: "But I'm full up of this here business. I'm going to get married."

A North Queensland hatter's temperament is not mercurial. But this piece of news staggered even the most hardened of the peripatetic stoics present. They stopped scraping their pipes and stared vaguely at the speaker.

"I'm going to get married," boldly reasserted Slogger.

"To — a — white — woman?" gasped one of the old men in an awed tone of voice.

"To a white woman!" And Slogger glanced defiantly at the incredulous crowd.

Then there was silence. But as the first shock wore off, one after the other of the callers remembered suddenly that there was no damper cooked at his camp for supper, or that the beef had been boiling over long, and vanished to digest the startling information at leisure.

Like wildfire the news spread that Slogger was going to get married. There had been no white woman on the Hills before, bar the storekeeper's wife. And that was long ago, when the rush was on. Also, she had never ventured beyond the little township into the privacy of the outside camps. And now — it was utterly incredible. Nay, worse, it was downright immoral!

A white woman! Some of the old hatters hadn't seen a white woman for years and years. And to have one of those strange animals living among them; blocking their very road into town with her presence! A strange sense of unsurmountable bashfulness overpowered them at the very idea. A dynamite factory as a neighbour would not have been a circumstance, compared to a white woman.

They remonstrated earnestly with Slogger. They shook off the calm indifference with which they had hitherto regarded life — or rather, vegetation. They became absolutely energetic in their endeavours to bring home to the recalcitrant sinner the enormity of the crime he contemplated. They blushed and stammered painfully at the very name of “woman.” But they persevered manfully.

Slogger, however, was adamant. He even dwelt facetiously on the coming event. He drew glowing pictures of the future state of his bill of fare. With reckless levity he introduced pet names and diminutives into his realistic day-dreamings, showing a hardened depravity too unspeakable for words. In short, Slogger’s moral sense was stone dead.

And then the old men down the creek began to cut him. They would sneak by without calling at the humpy, or while Slogger was at work on his beach. Visits became shorter and rarer, till at last they ceased altogether. The men crossed the creek above or below the Six-mile on their way to the shore and back, and scrambled along on the other side. The old track fell into disuse, and the couch-grass began to grow over it. The camp was shunned like a haunted house or a leper colony.

But Slogger cared not. This boycott rather confirmed him in his evil intention than otherwise. And one day it was whispered about that the packer had taken the whole of Slogger’s tin down the range, to the coastal town, for sale and the owner had followed on foot, clad in new moles and a resplendent Crimean shirt. And Possum Hills held its breath

A couple of weeks later two denizens of the lower camps walking into the store for their rations suddenly met Slogger on the track. He carried a small swag and was followed by a bull-pup of phenomenal ugliness.

“Hello, Slogger!” they exclaimed, not a little startled, and gazing past the old man in expectation of another apparition behind.

“Hello, chaps!” answered Slogger, and following their glances he turned around and trod on the dog.

“Oh, you’re looking at the pup? Smart little fellow, ain’t he?” And he proudly picked up the howling brute and tendered

it for exhibition.

"Make a darned good watchdog," opined one.

"You bet!" Slogger coincided, tenderly stroking the animal, and after carefully examining its feet, placed it down again on the road. Then he stepped back a yard or two, as if to get a better view of his acquisition, and gleefully remarked:

"The little beggar walked nearly all the way. I had to carry him only going up the range. He'll be a real good 'un to give those blimed dingoes fits you mark my words!"

He sat down on his swag, took the pipe out of his belt, and proceeded to scrape the ashes out of it. The other two mechanically followed his example, squatting down on the road, and gazing meditatively at the pup, that was lying on its back, submitting to a close scrutiny from the two elder dogs, and trying to curry favour with them by a series of most hideous grimaces.

At last one of the old men broke the ice. "Coming back from the coast, Slogger?" he suggested tentatively.

Slogger grunted assent, never taking his admiring eyes off the pup.

"And did ye — did ye —"

"Did I — what?"

"You know! About that there marriage business . . ." And again they glanced apprehensively down the track.

"No-o!" answered Slogger, as a man in a dream. And then, tearing himself away from the sight of the pup, he briskly knocked his pipe against a stone and explained:

"You see, I always did want a good dorg. And as the dingoes had done for poor Rover, I says to myself, says I: Now, what shall it be? A skirt or a dorg? And with that I meets the bloke as owned this here pup." And his gaze wandered fondly back to his purchase.

"Then you didn't get married at all?"

"No," said Slogger. "I thought I'd sooner buy the dorg."