

CHOMP, CHOMP

“The name Jesus Christ is little more than a swear word to millions of children.” Archbishop of Canterbury, *Courier Mail* article 28/5/77.)

Old Jack looked over the bloke’s shoulder at the paper he was reading and laughed. “A swear word, no fear mate – he’s been back you know – been back a few times I’d say. Saw him once m’self. He never used his brains though did he? I mean look what happened the first time he was around, now if you ask me. . . .”

The bloke he was talking to had no intention of asking him anything. He was new to this small town on the river, didn’t think much of the locals, he had come down to the town wharf for a quiet session of fishing and here was this old bloke breathing rum and mullet gut down his neck. He twitched the newspaper and Old Jack moved away. Robust with age, he wore the signs of years of work in the cane fields through frosty winters and soul deadening summers, he was retired now; on the pension – he liked to catch a few mud crabs occasionally, and wasn’t real pleased to find this dude in his favourite place on the town wharf.

Dropping the crab pot over the edge of the wharf he peered at it intently as it sank out of sight into the muddy river, settled down in the nest of his crabbing accessories which included a very smelly bucket of mullet gut, rolled a cigarette. . . “Now if you ask me, if he’d stuck to what he was good at – like makin’ wine outta water he would have been alright. Could have made a fortune, then instead of gettin’ mixed up in religion like he did an’ gettin’ himself nailed up on the odd boards because he joined the wrong mob – he could have bought himself an army and done them Romans like a dinner. And if the bit about bringing blokes back to life was fair dinkum, well he would have had no worries – would he? You know, no casualties. . . .”

Ignoring the fact that his conversation was being ignored,

he lifted his hat and scratched his head with one hand in the countryman's style indicating deep thought. "It was just after the war, me and Drainpipe Ernie, they called him Drainpipe because he was always sniffin' round the drainpipes at the distillery, used to bottle the stuff too and drink it, but it killed him — yair one day they put carbolic in the pipes and it killed him, poor old Drainpipe, aw well, we all gotta go some day . . .

Yair, well just after the war it was and we were down here at the wharf and this poofter looking bloke comes trailing along the riverbank with half the kids in town following him. A couple of the kinds were saying, are you gonna tell us another story Mister?

Yeh, yeh, he says, but you could see he was a bit frazzled, old Drainpipe reckoned he was the feller who had been camping on the Hummock for a month or so, I thought he looked like some poor shell-shocked bastard back from the war, he had this real vague look about him, looked silly enough to camp up on the bloody Hummock. So anyway, they're on the riverbank just there see, and the mozzies were real bad. . .and he's swatting at them and chewing on a hot pie he must have bought at Joe's on the way down to the riverbank, and he says: Okay I'll tell you another story about my father who loves you and wants you all to come and live in his house. . .but I gotta get away from these mozzies.

No Aerogard then mate, nothing like that at all. Course the mozzies weren't bothering us or the kids, we're used to them, but they were really going for him — something in his blood I suppose.

He wipes the crumbs and gravy off his fingers on his shirt, funny shirt it was, like them Indian things the hippies wear these days—takes his sandals off and walks off the bank onto the river, no mate he didn't swim — he walked. Course we didn't say anything, why should we — I mean if a bloke wants to walk on the bloody river, let him I say. They do it on telly all the time now — an' look a whole lot of people said Bert Hinkler would never get out of the sandhills, but I seen him — there he was — flying — and water's a whole lot thicker than bloody air mate.

He walks around a bit with his hands behind his back,

looking at the sky, you could see he was thinking – and then he clears his throat, have to after one of Joe's greasy pies – starts to say something – I had to drag the pot up and I didn't hear – but I saw this fin, and this Noah's ark heads out from underneath the wharf and before I could yell out or anything, it bloody well came up behind and grabbed him, a real big bugger it was, just opened its face, wrapped its teeth in his knees and chomp, chomp, he was gone mate.

Yair, the kids were a bit upset but when they started to moan, I just told them straight. . . You knew he was a stranger I said, didn't anyone of you silly buggers think to tell him the river is lousy with sharks here – it's not bloody Galleylee – it's the bloody Burnett River."

So that's it – God knows how many times the silly bugger has come back, but like I said he just doesn't use his brains. Course he could be just plain unlucky, some of us are, like me now – I was one off first prize in the Casket once just because the fellow who sold me the ticket sneezed and – what?

The sandals? Oh them, well when the kids mizzled off for tea or something, the sandals were still there on the riverbank, I picked them up took them home, I've been wearing them for years now, look! Real beauties aren't they? By Christ they don't make good stuff like this any more, no by Jesus they don't. . . ."

