A Child in the Dark and a Foreign Father

Henry Lawson

Table of Contents

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NEW Year's Eve! A hot night in midsummer in the drought. It was so dark −− with a smothering darkness −− that even the low loom of the scrub− covered ridges, close at hand across the creek, was not to be seen. The sky was not clouded for rain, but with drought haze and the smoke of distant bush fires.

Down the hard road to the crossing at Pipeclay Creek sounded the footsteps of a man. Not the crunching steps of an English labourer, clod−hopping contentedly home; these sounded more like the footsteps of one pacing steadily to and fro, and thinking steadily and hopelessly −− sorting out the past. Only the steps went on. A glimmer of white moleskin trousers and a suggestion of light−coloured tweed jacket, now and again, as if in the glimmer of a faint ghost light in the darkness.

The road ran along by the foot of a line of low ridges or spurs, and, as he passed the gullies or gaps, he felt a breath of hotter air, like blasts from a furnace in the suffocating atmosphere. He followed a two−railed fence for a short distance, and turned in at a white batten gate. It seemed lighter now. There was a house, or, rather, a hut suggested, with whitewashed slab walls and a bark roof. He walked quietly round to the door of a detached kitchen, opened it softly, went in and struck a match. A candle stood, stuck in a blot of its own grease, on one end of the dresser. He lit the candle and looked round.

The walls of the kitchen were of split slabs, the roof box−bark, the floor clay, and there was a large clay−lined fireplace, the sides a dirty brown, and the back black. It had evidently never been whitewashed. There was a bed of about a week's ashes, and above it, suspended by a blackened hook and chain from a grimy cross−bar, hung a black bucket full of warm water. The man got a fork, explored the bucket, and found what he expected −− a piece of raw corned−beef in water, which had gone off the boil before the meat had been heated through.

The kitchen was furnished with a pine table, a well−made flour bin, and a neat safe and side−board, or dresser −− evidently the work of a carpenter. The top of the safe was dirty −− covered with crumbs and grease and tea stains. On one corner lay a school exercise book, with a stone ink−bottle and a pen beside it. The book was open at a page written in the form of verse, in a woman's hand, and headed −−

"Misunderstood."

He took the edges of the book between his fingers and thumbs, and made to tear it, but, the cover being tough, and resisting the first savage tug, he altered his mind, and put the book down. Then he turned to the table. There was a jumble of dirty crockery on one end, and on the other, set on a sheet of stained newspaper, the remains of a meal −− a junk of badly−hacked bread, a basin of dripping (with the fat over the edges), and a tin of treacle. The treacle had run down the sides of the tin on to the paper. Knives, heavy with treacle, lay glued to the paper. There was a dish with some water, a rag, and a cup or two in it −− evidently an attempt to wash−up.

The man took up a cup and pressed it hard between his palms, until it broke. Then he felt relieved. He gathered the fragments in one hand, took the candle, and stumbled out to where there was a dust−heap. Kicking a hole in the ashes, he dropped in the bits of broken crockery, and covered them. Then his anger blazed again. He walked quickly to the back door of the house, thrust the door open, and flung in, but a child's voice said from the dark −−

"Is that you, father ? Don't tread on me, father."

The room was nearly as bare as the kitchen. There was a table, covered with cheap American oilcloth, and, on the other side, a sofa on which a straw mattress, a cloudy blanket, and a pillow without a slip had been thrown in a heap. On the floor, between the sofa and the table, lay a boy −− child almost −− on a similar mattress, with a cover of coarse sacking, and a bundle of dirty clothes for a pillow. A pale, thin−faced, dark−eyed boy.

"What are you doing here, sonny?" asked the father.

" Mother's bad again with her head. She says to tell you to come in quiet, and sleep on the sofa tonight. I started to wash up and clean up the kitchen, father, but I got sick."

" Why, what is the matter with you, sonny ? " His voice quickened, and he held the candle down to the child's face.

" Oh, nothing much, father. I felt sick, but I feel better now."

" What have you been eating?"

" Nothing that I know of; I think it was the hot weather, father."

The father spread the mattress, blew out the candle, and lay down in his clothes. After a while the boy began to toss restlessly.

" Oh, it's too hot, father," he said. "I'm smothering."

The father got up, lit the candle, took a corner of the newspaper−covered "scrim" lining that screened the cracks of the slab wall, and tore it away; then he propped open the door with a chair.

"Oh, that's better already, father," said the boy.

The hut was three rooms long and one deep, with a verandah in front and a skillion, harness and tool room, about half the length, behind. The father opened the door of the next room softly, and propped that open, too. There was another boy on the sofa, younger than the first, but healthy and sturdy−looking. He had nothing on him but a very dirty shirt, a patchwork quilt was slipping from under him, and most of it was on the floor; the boy and the pillow were nearly off, too.

The father fixed him as comfortably as possible, and put some chairs by the sofa to keep him from rolling off. He noticed that somebody had started to scrub this room, and left it. He listened at the door of the third room for a few moments to the breathing within; then he opened it and gently walked in. There was an old−fashioned four−poster cedar bedstead, a chest of drawers, and a baby's cradle made out of a gin−case. The woman was fast asleep. She was a big, strong, and healthy−looking woman, with dark hair and strong, square features. There was a plate, a knife and fork, and egg−shells, and a cup and saucer on the top of the chest of drawers; also two candles, one stuck in a mustard tin, and one in a pickle bottle, and a copy of Ardath.

He stepped out into the skillion, and lifted some harness on to its pegs from chaff−bags in the corner. Coming in again, he nearly stumbled over a bucket half−full of dirty water on the floor, with a scrubbing brush, some wet rags, and half a bar of yellow soap beside it. He put these things in the bucket, and carried it out. As he passed through the first room the sick boy said −−

"I couldn't lift the saddle of the harness on to the peg, father. I had to leave the scrubbing to make some tea and cook some eggs for mother,and put baby to bed, and then I felt too bad to go on with the scrubbing −− and I forgot about the bucket."

"Did the baby have any tea, sonny?"

"Yes. I made her bread and milk, and she ate a big plateful. The calves are in the pen alright, and I fixed the gate. And I brought a load of wood this morning, father, before mother took bad."

"You should not have done that. I told you not to. I could have done that on Sunday. Now, are you sure you didn't lift a log into the cart that was too heavy for you ? "

" Quite sure, father. Oh, I'm plenty strong enough to put a load of wood on the cart."

The father lay on his back on the sofa, with his hands behind his head, for a few minutes.

"Aren't you tired, father? " asked the boy.

"No, sonny, not very tired; you must try and go to sleep now," and he reached across the table for the candle, and blew it out.

Presently the baby cried, and in a moment the mother's voice was heard.

"Nils ! Nils ! Are you there, Nils?"

"Yes, Emma."

"Then for God's sake come and take this child away before she drives me mad ! My head's splitting."

The father went in to the child and presently returned for a cup of water.

"She only wanted a drink," the boy heard him say to the mother.

"Well, didn't I tell you she wanted a drink ? I've been calling for the last half−hour, with that child screaming, and not a soul to come near me, and me lying here helpless all day, and not a wink of sleep for two nights."

"But, Emma, you were asleep when I came in."

"How can you tell such infernal lies? I −−−−To think I'm chained to a man who can't say a word of truth ! God help me ! To have to lie night after night in the same bed with a liar!"

The child in the first room lay quaking with terror, dreading one of those cruel and shameful scenes which had made a hell of his childhood.

"Hush, Emma ! " the man kept saying. " Do be reasonable. Think of the children. They'll hear us."

"I don't care if they do. They'll know soon enough, God knows ! I wish I was under the turf!"

"Emma, do be reasonable."

"Reasonable ! I −−−−"

The child was crying again. The father came back to the first room, got something from his coat pocket, and took it in.

"Nils, are you quite mad, or do you want to drive me mad ? Don't give the child that rattle ! You must be either mad or a brute, and my nerves in this state. Haven't you got the slightest consideration for −−−−"

"It's not a rattle, Emma; it's a doll."

"There you go again ! Flinging your money away on rubbish that'll be on the dust−heap to−morrow, and your poor wife slaving her finger−nails off for you in this wretched hole, and not a decent rag to her back. Me, your clever wife that ought to be −−−−. Light those candles and bring me a wet towel for my head. I must read now, and try and compose my nerves, if I can."

When the father returned to the first room, the boy was sitting up in bed, looking deathly white.

" Why, what's the matter, sonny ? " said the father, bending over him, and putting a hand to his back.

"Nothing, father. I'll be all right directly. Don't you worry, father."

"Where do you feel bad, sonny ? "

"In my head and stomach, father; but I'll be all right d'rectly. I've often been that way."

In a minute or two he was worse.

"For God's sake, Nils, take that boy into the kitchen, or somewhere," cried the woman, " or I'll go mad. It's enough to kill a horse. Do you want to drive me into a lunatic asylum ? "

"Do you feel better now, sonny ? " asked the father.

"Yes, ever so much better, father," said the boy, white and weak. " I'll be all right in a minute, father."

"You had best sleep on the sofa to−night, sonny. It's cooler there."

"No, father, I'd rather stay here; it's much cooler now."

The father fixed the bed as comfortably as he could, and, despite the boy's protest, put his own pillow under his head. Then he made a fire in the kitchen, and hung the kettle and a big billy of water over it. He was haunted by recollections of convulsions amongst the children while they were teething. He took off his boots, and was about to lie down again when the mother called −−

" Nils, Nils, have you made a fire ? "

" Yes, Emma."

"Then for God's sake make me a cup of tea. I must have it after all this."

He hurried up the kettle −− she calling every few minutes to know if "that kettle was boiling yet." He took her a cup of tea, and then a second. She said the tea was slush, and as sweet as syrup, and called for more, and hot water.

"How do you feel now, sonny ?" he asked as he lay down on the sofa once more.

" Much better, father. You can put out the light now if you like."

The father blew out the candle, and settled back again, still dressed, save for his coat, and presently the small, weak hand sought the hard, strong, horny, knotted one; and so they lay, as was customary with them. After a while the father leaned over a little and whispered −−

" Asleep, sonny ?"

" No, father."

" Feel bad again?"

" No, father."

Pause.

"What are you thinking about, sonny ?"

"Nothing, father."

"But what is it ? What are you worrying about ? Tell me."

"Nothing, father, only −− it'll be a good while yet before I grow up to be a man, won't it, father?"

The father lay silent and troubled for a few moments.

"Why do you ask me that question to−night sonny? I thought you'd done with all that. You were always asking me that question when you were a child. You're getting too old for those foolish fancies now. Why have you always had such a horror of growing up to be a man ?"

"I don't know, father. I always had funny thoughts −− you know, father. I used to think that I'd been a child once before, and grew up to be a man, and grew old and died."

"You're not well to−night, sonny −− that's what's the matter. You're queer, sonny; it's a touch of sun −− that's all. Now, try to go to sleep. You'll grow up to be a man, in spite of laying awake worrying about it. If you do. you'll be a man all the sooner."

Suddenly the mother called out −−

"Can't you be quiet ? What do you mean by talking at this hour of the night ? Am I never to get another wink of sleep ? Shut those doors, Nils, for God's sake. if you don't want to drive me mad −− and make that boy hold his tongue!"

The father closed the doors.

"Better try to to to sleep now, sonny," he whispered, as he lay down again.

The father waited for some time, then, moving very softly, he lit the candle at the kitchen fire, put it where it shouldn't light the boy's face, and watched him.

And the child knew he was watching him, and pretended to sleep, and, so pretending, he slept. And the old year died as many old years had died.

The father was up about four o'clock −− he worked at his trade in a farming town about five miles away and was struggling to make a farm and a home between jobs. He cooked bacon for breakfast, washed up the dishes and tidied the kitchen, gave the boys some bread and bacon fat, of which they were very fond, and told the eldest to take a cup of tea and some bread and milk to his mother and the baby when they woke.

The boy milked the three cows, set the milk, and heard his mother calling −−

"Nils ! Nils !"

"Yes, mother."

"Why didn't you answer when I called you ? I've been calling here for the last three hours. Is your father gone out?"

"Yes, mother."

"Thank God ! It's a relief to be rid of his everlasting growling. Bring me a cup of tea and the Australian Journal, and take this child out and dress her; she should have been up hours ago."

And so the New Year began.