WOLFE'S SCHNAPPS,
AGREAT RELIEF IN RHEUMATISM.
The Mythical Sundowner

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Dear BULLETIN,—I notice in your issue of September 14 a contribution entitled “The Mythical Sundowner,” which, I must say, is calculated to convey an impression erroneous as that which it is designed to correct.

In what part of the civilised world and in what grade of society, under circumstances and conditions favourable to his development, is the professional loafer and potential sundowner not found? 'Tis a spirit: sometimes it appears like a lord, sometimes like a lawyer, sometimes like a philosopher; he is very often like a knight, and generally walks in all the shapes that man goes up and down from fourscore to thirteen. Given the opportunity to loaf, and you can trust our poor, frail human nature to supply the loafer. Great is laziness and she will prevail. Millions breathe but to inherit her forever-lounging spirit. This spirit may equally be tabernacled in the bedizened body of the heiress-hunting assassin-officer or in the rag-clad anatomy of the fragrant hanger-on at a country pub. Nothing short of the mutual police system of ideal Socialism will ever shift the beggar—I use the title not inadvertently, but advisedly and critically. Never believe but that the Riverina shanty of the present day witnesses many a modified repetition of the scene at Pousie Nansie’s a century ago, when those tuneful sundowners held the splore, to drink their orra duddies. Ask any elderly and observant Irishman whether he ever saw a beggarman, and mark his answer—mark his answer, I say, for you can thereby determine his religious persuasion: if he be a member of the dominant class, he will, whilst admitting the existence of the Irish sundowner, carefully impress on you that the individual in question is invariably “more Popery than fiscal.”

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You will become giddy in attempting to trace the origin of the loafer—the blue-gown, gaberlunzie, beggar man, sundowner, sinecurist, &c., being, of course, sub-species, each developed by special conditions favourable to its particular growth. Members of this ancient order often stretched their legs (saving reverence of the word) under Ulysses’ mahogany whilst the absent hero made history in a manner which reminds us of Baron Munchausen. Back, back in dim epochs which have left but scanty relics, the pre-historic sundowner
performed his diurnal journey from one lacustrine dwelling to another in his bark canoe, while
the Swiss mountains—fit type of his own interminable continuance—catapulted avalanche
after avalanche at his invulnerable head. Back, back in the very earliest of the perished
civilisations—in fact since the invention of laziness—the sundowner has been an institution;
in this secondary sense, and in no other, he may be termed “mythical.” And wherever food is
to be obtained without the vulgar equivalent of work, there the sundowner of the present day
sits, like Patience on a monument, smiling at his unearned increment—namely his pannikin of
flour.

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The social and economic conditions of Riverina being perhaps even more favourable
to the perpetuation and advancement of this ancient and time-defying cult than are the traditional
usages of the upper and upper-middle classes of Great Britain, it would be rather surprising if,
as your contributor says, “The sundowner or Murrumbidgee whaler has no existence and
never had.” I grieve to say I have seen the sundowner in force—not merely seen him, for,
being a nobleman at large rather than a Knight Companion of the Bath, he generally appeals
to another sense—wasting his sweetness on the desert air anywhere and everywhere between
the Murray and the Darling. He does not by any means “carry his swag from station to station,
travelling a score of miles under a burning sun where water is often unobtainable.” Not at all:
that is more like what an independent, self-respecting man would do. Your gentleman-
sundowner does not disdain the simple hospitalities of the contractor’s or rabbiter’s or
bullock-driver’s or drover’s camp; and true men will not insult the submissive, be he ever so
worthless. Do not imagine that he necessarily bakes his pannikin of station-flour at once; his
constant care is to increase his slender store so that he may retire to some secluded bend
where he can mend his diet with a few cod-fish (hence the name “Whaler”), and fleet the time
carelessly as they did i’ the golden age. His wants are few and simple; he wears cast-off
clothes; and eating is, in a great measure, an acquired habit. The man who, in lieu of honest
“calluses” on the palm of his hand, is distinguished by knuckles of aboriginal blackness,
perennially lustrous with the gloss which blankets alone can give, is not easily starved.
Starve? quotha!—starve a blackfellow.

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Neither is it fair to the squatter to assume that his hospitality to travellers—which by the way,
is preposterously over-rated by every writer I have met with—is intended by him as a menace
to his employees or is even interpreted by them as such. It is simply a pastoral tradition which
cannot be abruptly swept away. The type squatter, in spite of his unkind and insolent attitude
towards drovers, carriers, &c., and his unrelenting animosity to selectors, is by far the most considerate and indulgent employer in Australia; and, as might be expected, his employees are devoted, body and soul, to his interests. This is very beautiful in the present, but may be most disastrous in the future. It means unquestioned lordship and contented peonage—it means caste. By-and-by a king arises who knows not Joseph; the population begins to press upon him the means of support, and the canaille are counselled to eat grass. Ask history what follows.

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But a drove of 300 sundowners is just the sort of mis-statement we should expect to find in an English magazine. The writer referred to by your contributor has ignorantly confounded with this base and helpless class the honest workers who, as the shearing season approaches, come from Victoria and eastern New South Wales like lions from the swelling of Jordan. These are the very antithesis of the sundowner—active, emulous, and independent and capable men; they appear by hundreds in the early spring and disappear as summer approaches. Your true sundowner will scarcely accept the easiest work of a rouseabout in the shearing season: at any other time he will not work. At Willandra, a few years ago, I saw 12 out of 13 sundowners refuse 15s. per week—with board of course—for burr cutting; the offer being made to them by the station storekeeper as he served out the traditional pannikin of flour and a bit of raw mutton. To be sure, 15s per week is far below the average revenue of royal or aristocratic loafers, but it is ample compensation for riding a quiet horse for seven or eight hours per diem, while you carry across your saddle-bow the lightest hoe known to the hardware trade. I felt interested in those 12 princes. I sought their society that evening in the rouseabout’s hut by the woolshed, and I can safely say that I have seldom spent three hours more pleasantly or profitably. The conversation, so far as I can remember, ran entirely on the subject of station hospitality to “travelers.” In the darkness of the hut, gruff voices and squeaky voices and drawling voices and snuffling voices rose here and there from the bunks in championship or condemnation of names familiar to the pastoral ear as wicked words—Tyson and Landell and Locky, of course—Sammy Wilson, Ole Ric, Hungry This, Gentlemen That, Charley Officer on the Port Phillip side, &c. As an evidence of Conservatism, I noticed that though these hidalgos necessarily associated daily, more or less, with the few inhabitants of those lonely plains, they always spoke of the Cabbage Garden as “Port Phillip,” of the Holy Land as “’tother side,” and of Australia as the “Sydney side.” It was the honest impression of every one of their Serene Highnesses that a squatter’s pastoral licence contained a provision binding the feoffee to supply to each and every professional knight-errant, on demand, the traditional
pannikin of flour. So that, you see, the sundowner claims his tribute by imagined authority of law as well as by indefeasible divine right.

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On the approach of intenser civilisation the true gentleman-sundowner folds up his tent like the mallee-hen, and as silently steals away. I was on the Murumbidgee when the north bank of the river became suddenly busy by reason of the construction of the Junee and Hay railway line, and I noticed a marked change in the old order of things, that the sundowner, for a time, ceased to peregrinate up and down the river eating Jacky Dow’s mutton.

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We have already seen that the representative or typical sundowner never dies. It is questionable whether even the individual would die—seeing that he is never sick, never was any younger and never grows any older—but that he is subject to accident. During the protracted floods of ’70, many of these unfortunate waifs—no one knows how many—perished miserably, marooned on insulated-patches of higher ground along the rivers or drowned as their refuges became submerged. Casualties of many kinds thin their ranks, and recruits are not so plentiful now as 20 or 30 years ago. The old economic systems which produce and tolerate social extremes are dying out—dying hard, certainly, after the manner of abuses, but dying, nevertheless.

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Still, while human nature sports into so many varieties and degrees of laziness, the sundowner will never fail; men may come and men may go, but he goes on forever. Pastoral interests may wax and wane: stations may be incorporated, divided, sold, or foreclosed; managers may die, resign, be sacked, or received into partnership; the Mantchoorian boundary-man may supersede the Indo-Germanic, but while there exists a circuit of stations as a basis of operations, the phoenix-like sundowner shall flourish in immortal youth.

Warrigal Jack.