Settling on the Land

By Henry Lawson

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The worst bore in Australia just now is the man who raves about getting the people on the land, and button-holes you in the street with a little scheme of his own. He generally does not know what he is talking about.

There is in Sydney a man named Tom Hopkins who settled on the land once, and sometimes you can get him to talk about it. He did very well at his trade in the city, years ago, until he began to think that he could do better up-country. Then he arranged with his sweetheart to be true to him and wait whilst he went West and made a home. She drops out of the story at this point.

He selected on a run at Dry Hole Creek, and for months awaited the arrival of the Government surveyors to fix his boundaries; but they didn't come, and, as he had no reason to believe they would turn up within the next ten years, he grubbed and fenced at a venture, and started farming operations.

Does the reader know what grubbing means? Tom does. He found the biggest, ugliest, and most useless trees on his particular piece of ground; also the greatest number of adamantine stumps. He started without experience, or with very little, but with plenty of advice from men who knew less about farming than he did.

He found a soft place between two roots on one side of the first tree, made a narrow, irregular hole, and burrowed down till he reached a level where the tap-root was somewhat less than four feet in diameter, and not quite as hard as flint: then he found that he hadn't room to swing the axe, so he heaved out another ton or two of earth — and rested.

Next day he sank a shaft on the other side of the gum; and after tea, over a pipe, it struck him that it would be a good idea to burn the tree out, and so use up

the logs and lighter rubbish lying round. So he widened the excavation, rolled in some logs, and set fire to them — with no better result than to scorch the roots.

Tom persevered. He put the trace harness on his horse, drew in all the logs within half a mile, and piled them on the windward side of that gum; and during the night the fire found a soft place, and the tree burnt off about six feet above the surface, falling on a squatter's boundary fence, and leaving the ugliest kind of stump to occupy the selector's attention; which it did, for a week. He waited till the hole cooled, and then he went to work with pick, shovel, and axe: and even now he gets interested in drawings of machinery, such as are published in the agricultural weeklies, for getting out stumps without graft.

He thought he would be able to get some posts and rails out of that tree, but found reason to think that a cast-iron column would split sooner — and straighter. He traced some of the surface roots to the other side of the selection, and broke most of his trace-chains trying to get them out by horse-power — for they had other roots going down from underneath. He cleared a patch in the course of time and for several seasons he broke more plough-shares than he could pay for.

Meanwhile the squatter was not idle. Tom's tent was robbed several times, and his hut burnt down twice. Then he was charged with killing some sheep and a steer on the run, and converting them to his own use, but got off mainly because there was a difference of opinion between the squatter and the other local J.P. concerning politics and religion.

Tom ploughed and sowed wheat, but nothing came up to speak of — the ground was too poor; so he carted stable manure six miles from the nearest town,

manured the land, sowed another crop, and prayed for rain. It came. It raised a flood which washed the crop clean off the selection, together with several acres of manure, and a considerable portion of the original surface soil; and the water brought down enough sand to make a beach, and spread it over the field to a depth of six inches. The flood also took half a mile of fencing from along the creek bank, and landed it in a bend, three miles down, on a dummy selection, where it was confiscated.

Tom didn't give up — he was energetic. He cleared another piece of ground on the siding, and sowed more wheat; it had the rust in it, or the smut — and averaged three shillings per bushel. Then he sowed lucerne and oats, and bought a few cows: he had an idea of starting a dairy. First, the cows' eyes got bad, and he sought the advice of a German cockie, and acted upon it; he blew powdered alum through paper tubes into the bad eyes, and got some of it snorted and butted back into his own. He cured the cows' eyes and got the sandy blight in his own, and for a week or so he couldn't tell one end of a cow from the other, but sat in a dark corner of the hut and groaned, and soaked his glued eyelashes in warm water. Germany stuck to him and nursed him, and saw him through.

Then the milkers got bad udders, and Tom took his life in his hands whenever he milked them. He got them all right presently — and butter fell to fourpence, a pound. He and the aforesaid cockie made arrangements to send their butter to a better market; and then the cows contracted a disease which was known in those parts as 'plooro permoanyer,' but generally referred to as 'th' ploorer.'

Again Tom sought advice, acting upon which he slit the cows' ears, cut their tails half off to bleed them, and poured pints of 'pain killer' into them through

their nostrils; but they wouldn’t make an effort, except, perhaps, to rise and poke the selector when he tried to tempt their appetites with slices of immature pumpkin. They died peacefully and persistently, until all were gone save a certain dangerous, barren, slab-sided luny bovine with white eyes and much agility in jumping fences, who was known locally as Queen Elizabeth.

Tom shot Queen Elizabeth, and turned his attention to agriculture again. Then his plough horses took bad with something the Teuton called ‘der shtranguls.’ He submitted them to a course of treatment in accordance with Jacob’s advice — and they died.

Even then Tom didn’t give in — there was grit in that man. He borrowed a broken-down dray horse in return for its keep, coupled it with his own old riding hack, and started to finish ploughing. The team wasn’t a success. Whenever the draught horse’s knees gave way and he stumbled forward, he jerked the lighter horse back into the plough, and something would break.

Then Tom would blaspheme till he was refreshed, mend up things with wire and bits of clothes-line, fill his pockets with stones to throw at the team, and start again. Finally he hired a dummy’s child to drive the horses. The brat did his best: he tugged at the head of the team, prodded it behind, heaved rocks at it, cut a sapling, got up his enthusiasm, and wildly whacked the light horse whenever the other showed signs of moving — but he never succeeded in starting both horses at one and the same time.

Moreover the youth was cheeky, and the selector’s temper had been soured: he cursed the boy along with the horses, the plough, the selection, the squatter,

and Australia. Yes, he cursed Australia. The boy cursed back, was chastised, and immediately went home and brought his father.

Then the dummy's dog tackled the selector's dog and this precipitated things. The dummy would have gone under had his wife not arrived on the scene with the eldest son and the rest of the family. They all fell foul of Tom. The woman was the worst. The selector's dog chawed the other and came to his master's rescue just in time — or Tom Hopkins would never have lived to become the inmate of a lunatic asylum.

Next year there happened to be good grass on Tom's selection and nowhere else, and he thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to get a few poor sheep, and fatten them up for market: sheep were selling for about seven-and-six pence a dozen at that time. Tom got a hundred or two, but the squatter had a man stationed at one side of the selection with dogs to set on the sheep directly they put their noses through the fence (Tom's was not a sheep fence). The dogs chased the sheep across the selection and into the run again on the other side, where another man waited ready to pound them.

Tom's dog did his best; but he fell sick while chawing up the fourth capitalistic canine, and subsequently died. The dummies had rubbed that cur with poison before starting it across — that was the only way they could get at Tom's dog.

Tom thought that two might play at the game, and he tried; but his nephew, who happened to be up from the city on a visit, was arrested at the instigation of the squatter for alleged sheep-stealing, and sentenced to two years' hard; during which time the selector himself got six months for assaulting the squatter with

intent to do him grievous bodily harm — which, indeed, he more than attempted, if a broken nose, a fractured jaw, and the loss of most of the squatter's teeth amounted to anything. The squatter by this time had made peace with the other local Justice, and had become his father-in-law.

When Tom came out there was little left for him to live for; but he took a job of fencing, got a few pounds together, and prepared to settle on the land some more. He got a 'missus' and a few cows during, the next year; the missus robbed him and ran away with the dummy, and the cows died in the drought, or were impounded by the squatter while on their way to water. Then Tom rented an orchard up the creek, and a hailstorm destroyed all the fruit.

Germany happened to be represented at the time, Jacob having sought shelter at Tom's hut on his way home from town. Tom stood leaning against the door post with the hail beating on him through it all. His eyes were very bright and very dry, and every breath was a choking sob. Jacob let him stand there, and sat inside with a dreamy expression on his hard face, thinking of childhood and fatherland, perhaps.

When it was over he led Tom to a stool and said, 'You waits there, Tom. I must go home for somedings. You sits there still and waits twenty minutes;' then he got on his horse and rode off muttering to himself: 'Dot man moost gry, dot man moost gry.' He was back inside of twenty minutes with a bottle of wine and a cornet under his overcoat. He poured the wine into two pint pots, made Tom drink, drank himself, and then took his cornet, stood up at the door, and played a German march into the rain after the retreating storm.

The hail had passed over his vineyard and he was a ruined man too. Tom did ‘gry’ and was all right. He was a bit disheartened, but he did another job of fencing, and was just beginning to think about ‘puttin’ in a few vines an’ fruit trees’ when the Government surveyors — whom he’d forgotten all about — had a resurrection and came and surveyed, and found that the real selection was located amongst some barren ridges across the creek. Tom reckoned it was lucky he didn’t plant the orchard, and he set about shifting his home and fences to the new site. But the squatter interfered at this point, entered into possession of the farm and all on it, and took action against the selector for trespass — laying the damages at £2500.

Tom was admitted to the lunatic asylum at Parramatta next year, and the squatter was sent there the following summer, having been ruined by the drought, the rabbits, the banks, and a wool-ring. The two became very friendly, and had many a sociable argument about the feasibility — or otherwise — of blowing open the floodgates of Heaven in a dry season with dynamite.

Tom was discharged a few years since. He knocks about certain suburbs a good deal. He is seen in daylight seldom, and at night mostly in connection with a dray and a lantern. He says his one great regret is that he wasn’t found to be of unsound mind before he went up-country.