THE SHEARING OF THE COOK'S DOG

Henry Lawson

The dog was a little conservative mongrel poodle, with long dirty white hair all over him--longest and most over his eyes, which glistened through it like black beads. Also he seemed to have a bad liver. He always looked as if he was suffering from a sense of injury, past or to come. It did come. He used to follow the shearers up to the shed after breakfast every morning, but he couldn't have done this for love--there was none lost between him and the men. He wasn't an affectionate dog; it wasn't his style. He would sit close against the shed for an hour or two, and hump himself, and sulk, and look sick, and snarl whenever the "Sheep-Ho" dog passed, or a man took notice of him. Then he'd go home. What he wanted at the shed at all was only known to himself; no one asked him to come. Perhaps he came to collect evidence against us. The cook called him "my darg," and the men called the cook "Curry and Rice," with "old" before it mostly.

Curry-and-Rice was a little, dumpy, fat man, with a round, smooth, good-humoured face, a bald head, feet wide apart, and a big blue cotton apron. He had been a ship's cook. He didn't look so much out of place in the hut as the hut did round him. To a man with a vivid imagination, if he regarded the cook dreamily for a while, the floor might seem to roll gently like the deck of a ship, and mast, rigging, and cuddy rise mistily in the background. Curry might have dreamed of the cook's galley at times, but he never mentioned it. He ought to have been at sea, or comfortably dead and stowed away underground, instead of cooking for a mob of unredeemed rouseabouts in an uncivilized shed in the scrub, six hundred miles from the ocean.

They chiacked the cook occasionally, and grumbled--or pretended to grumble--about their tucker, and then he'd make a roughly pathetic speech, with many references to his age, and the hardness of his work, and the smallness of his wages, and the inconsiderateness of the men. Then the joker of the shed would sympathize with the cook with his tongue and one side of his face--and joke with the other.

One day in the shed, during smoke-ho the devil whispered to a shearer named Geordie that it would be a lark to shear the cook's dog—the Evil One having previously arranged that the dog should be there, sitting close to Geordie's pen, and that the shearer should have a fine lamb comb on his machine. The idea was communicated through Geordie to his mates, and met with entire and general approval; and for five or ten minutes the air was kept alive by shouting and laughter of the men, and the protestations of the dog. When the shearer touched skin, he yelled "Tar!" and when he finished he shouted "Wool away!" at the top of his voice, and his mates echoed him with a will. A picker-up gathered the fleece with a great show of labour and care, and tabled it, to the well-ventilated disgust of old Scotty, the wool-roller. When they let the dog go he struck for home--a clean-shaven poodle, except for a ferocious moustache and a tuft at the end of his tail.

The cook's assistant said that he'd have given a five-pound note for a portrait of Curry-and-Rice when that poodle came back from the shed.

The cook was naturally very indignant; he was surprised at first—then he got mad. He had the whole afternoon to get worked up in, and at tea-time he went for the men properly.

"Wotter yer growlin' about?" asked one. "Wot's the matter with yer, anyway?"

"I don't know nothing about yer dog!" protested a rouseabout; "wotyer gettin' on to me for?"

"Wotter they bin doin' to the cook now?" inquired a ring leader innocently, as he sprawled into his place at the table. "Can't yer let Curry alone? Wot d'yer want to be chiacking' him for? Give it a rest."

"Well, look here, chaps," observed Geordie, in a determined tone, "I call it a shame, that's what I call it. Why couldn't you leave an old man's dog alone? It was a mean, dirty trick to do, and I suppose you thought it funny. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, the whole lot of you, for a drafted mob of crawlers. If I'd been there it wouldn't have been done; and I wouldn't blame Curry if he was to poison the whole convicted push."

General lowering of faces and pulling of hats down over eyes, and great working of knives and forks; also sounds like men trying not to laugh.

"Why couldn't you play a trick on another man's darg?" said Curry. "It's no use tellin' me. I can see it all as plain as if I was on the board--all of you runnin' an' shoutin' an' cheerin' an' laughin', and all over shearin' and ill-usin' a poor little darg! Why couldn't you play a trick on another man's darg?... It doesn't matter much--I'm nearly done cookie' here now.... Only that I've got a family to think of I wouldn't 'a' stayed so long. I've got to be up at five

every mornin', an' don't get to bed till ten at night, cookin' an' bakin' an' cleanin' for you an' waitin' on you. First one lot in from the wool-wash, an' then one lot in from the shed, an' another lot in, an' at all hours an' times, an' all wantin' their meals kept hot, an' then they ain't satisfied. And now you must go an' play a dirty trick on my darg! Why couldn't you have a lark with some other man's darg!"

Geordie bowed his head and ate as though he had a cud, like a cow, and could chew at leisure. He seemed ashamed, as indeed we all were--secretly. Poor old Curry's oft-repeated appeal, "Why couldn't you play a trick with another man's dog?" seemed to have something

pathetic about it. The men didn't notice that it lacked philanthropy and logic, and probably the cook didn't notice it either, else he wouldn't have harped on it. Geordie lowered his face, and just then, as luck or the devil would have it, he caught sight of the dog. Then

he exploded.

The cook usually forgot all about it in an hour, and then, if you asked him what the chaps had been doing, he'd say, "Oh, nothing! nothing! Only their larks!" But this time he didn't; he was narked for three days, and the chaps marvelled much and were sorry, and treated him with great respect and consideration. They hadn't thought he'd take it so hard--the dog shearing business--else they wouldn't have done it. They were a little puzzled too, and getting a trifle angry, and would shortly be prepared to take the place of the injured

party, and make things unpleasant for the cook. However, he brightened up towards the end of the week, and then it all came out.

"I wouldn't 'a' minded so much," he said, standing by the table with a dipper in one hand, a bucket in the other, and a smile on his face. "I wouldn't 'a' minded so much only they'll think me a flash man in Bourke with that theer darg trimmed up like that!"