

A TASTE OF THE CAT

John Biggs

I

THE HOBART TOWN GAZETTE

13th October, 1845

CONVICT OVERSEER MISSING

Port Arthur. The Commandant at Port Arthur, Colonel O'Hara Booth, today declared Mr. Robert Trumper, a convict overseer, missing presumed dead. Mr. Trumper, and a convict trustee Master Joshua Wilson, had been six days in the wilds of Forestier Peninsula under orders to explore areas suitable for the felling of timber. Yesterday, a distraught Wilson, considerably enfeebled and suffering from exposure, staggered back to the base camp to report the loss of his master. Mr. Trumper had insisted, said Master Wilson, upon conducting a reconnaissance alone, and when he did not return as expected, young Wilson conducted several searches but to no avail. His provisions exhausted, he returned to the base camp at Eagle Hawk Neck, to guide further search parties, but their endeavours were fruitless. In the Commandant's words, young Wilson manifested "those very qualities of responsibility and fortitude we hope to inspire in our young charges at Point Puer", and was granted his ticket-of-leave forthwith.

II

Josh had exerted himself mightily, and most barrels and crates were now stacked in their appointed places. I besought him to make haste with the rest, as the impending storm would be upon us in short measure.

Poor Josh. His brow bore a sheen of moisture, his large brown long-lashed eyes bloodshot with the liquid incursions insisting their course from brow to corner to lash. Eyes, dare I say, so like those of my Eliza, awaiting in far off Hertfordshire. And here was Josh, also with doe-like eyes and ready smile, but shirt saturated with honest sweat, and pantaloons drawing humidity into crevices wherein humidity would be unwelcome.

I therefore enjoined him: "Josh, lad, you are feeling the heat. I pray you, if you do not feel embarrassed thereby, do remove your shirt..."

Whereupon he did: and what a sight to behold! I gazed with loathing, with pity, and I must needs confess, with fascination, upon what I saw before me. His back was coursed, like some outlandish delta, a river running purple and extending into many tributaries, with welts, scars, and contusions, now healed, but once evidently running rivers of blood, and many rivers at different times: a palimpsest of river systems, the watershed his bruised spine. I had previously discerned the stray cicatrix upon his nape, but little did I guess the devastation that lay below.

"Josh, lad, what is this?" I knew, of course, the instrument that would create such horrifying damage, but what could such a fine lad as Josh have done to bring down upon himself such a terrible consequence?

"That, Sir?" He turned his soft fawn-like eyes upon me, as it were mockingly. "That, Sir, be a taste of the cat."

III

The 12th day of December in the Year of Our Lord 1845

My dearest Eliza,

I write this, my dearest of dears, secure within my little emporium-cum-home. Without, the tempest rages and howls. How I long to be with you in the gentle brooks and greeneries of our beloved Letchworth!

"The night is dark, and I am far from home"

But cease your groans! I have done well, and am building a business that will as time unfolds, provide us in a manner exceeding all our hopes! Why, today, did I not lay in an abundance of stores, – with the help of my fine young convict lad, *anent vide infra*, – that I propose to sell to my sturdy fellow colonists at a rate I calculate will yield in excess of seven hundred per centum. Now cease your altruistic expostulations! Your Matthew is as pious as his saintly namesake, – tax collector that Matthew may once have been, Apostle of Christ he assuredly became.

But let me not afflict my dearest dear with details that in truth belong to the masculine comprehension. What of my nourishment, my clothing, my habitation; those creature comforts to which the feminine mind doth so readily and joyfully relate? Ah, here is paradox indeed! I have been assigned a convict lad; "Ticket-of-Leave" his station, "Joshua" his appellation, "Matthew" his salvation! To him have I assigned such duties as may alleviate my cares, and your own tender "feminine" concerns. Josh is versatile, working also in the shop with me, when his household duties are done.

Why, today this paragon of lads unflinchingly did labour long and hard under a hot sun ("Diemonian" indeed!), a consequence of which was that he revealed his naked back, and therewith a sight that held me in thrall....

At this point I took pause. My Eliza's letter could wait awhile. Thoughts, as yet shapeless and as diverse in import, worried at the edge of my mind.

IV

The rain has washed the skies, and Mt. Wellington, that great reclining whale that keeps watch over Hobarton, is now a shining purple and very clean whale, her baleen teeth grinning down at us as we shake off our matutinal sloth to face the new day's labour.

Well that Josh's efforts had been expended yester-eve. My goods are now stowed, none the worse for the nocturnal elements, ready for today's labours. Within a trice he attacks those wooden crates with jemmy, bar and a right good will. With crashing, banging and asplintering that is music to my ears, my investments are released first for my initial delectation, and then for my recording, pricing, storing, and display.

As each crate is opened, I carefully lay out the contents. First, the food and condiments, in which Josh takes little interest; next gentlemen's apparel, in which he takes rather more. He seizes upon a fine shirt, with excellent lace-work on collar and cuffs, and elaborately carved mother-of-pearl buttons; he holds it against his own coarse grey shirt. He then swaggers, insolent lad, to the long mirror inside the shop and turns this way and that, preening like any young fop.

But I am in good humour. The lad has little enough decent vestiture, I trow, with which to clothe his indecently mutilated flesh. I come up behind him, and gaze with him at his unusually adorned image. Our eyes meet in the mirror. "Think it fits, lad?"

"That it do, Sir" he replies.

"Then it's yours!"

His joy is transparent. His eyes light, and with a hoarse "Thank 'ee, Sir!", bounds to his small room at the back, where he places his precious new shirt with his few belongings.

Back to our chores, and I think to question him further, as to the occasions, – evidently many such, – of his vicious floggings, for curious am I as to the whys and wherefores. Whereas such treatment might be expected in the case of some hardened criminal, expected it would not be in that of as docile, hard-working, and charming a lad as my Josh; who, for stealing some fruit, was despatched along with hundreds of other unfortunate but not truly delinquent lads to Port Arthur. To Point Puer to be precise, to be reformed and trained, ultimately each to take his appointed and unblemished place in society.

"Josh, as you were never properly a convict, what events led to your receiving such terrible and oft-repeated punishment?"

He at first looks eagerly towards me, but as I proceed his eyes slide from mine. "Oh, I were a bad lad, I suppose, Sir. At least there were one or two who thought so..." his eyes and voice fade.

"Why then, more evilly mistaken they!" I cry, "I could not in a thousand years think you deserving of such treatment!"

"Thank you kindly, Sir" he returns meekly, but with force (within the bounds of respect) adds, "but please don't ask me no more questions about that."

I regret very much my importunate questioning. He now attacks with serious mien the last of the crates, these comprising finery for the fairer sex. I think to enliven matters. To recall the occasioning of his earlier joy, I hold a pretty, pale blue dress against me, just as he had his shirt:

"What think you of this Josh, lad? Does it suit me?"

He looks up, seeming grateful for the break in tension. "No, Sir, it not be thy colour!"

I laugh aloud at this quick sally. I spy a long ivory coloured dress, with an excellent design picked out in darker brown. "Maybe, but this be your colour surely!"

The night before I had set sail, Eliza had worn a dress much akin to this. It had with startling effect offset her dark eyes and darker hair. I stare the more now, as I mentally match this dress against Josh's own colouring and lineaments. I move to the mirror and hold it up. "Try this against you, like you did with the shirt."

Josh stiffens. For an instant, a strange, fierce, look clouds his countenance. Then "Of course, for you, Sir."

He holds the dress in front of him, and I gaze over his shoulder into the mirror. Stunned, I behold the image of my Eliza. But only for an instant, as Josh lets the dress fall, revealing his coarse work-shirt. Yet I am now gripped with a strange passion, a stirring I may not deny. Affecting a levity I do not in truth feel, I cry:

"Josh, that does suit you... or rather" I add, as I behold as I think his much aggrieved reaction, "your colouring is just that of my affianced, her features are not unlike your own; I even thought I just now beheld her..."

A wish now forms with stark clarity. "Josh, take this not amiss, but would you go to your room, and come out wearing this dress... It would make me feel as if my beloved were verily present. It would mean so much to me. And then, that's it, back to work!" I conclude matter of factly.

My request affronts him grievously, I see immediately. But as I prattle on, he smiles a tight, reluctant smile. "If it be that important to you, Sir. But only for an instant..."

It is now dusk. Beyond the glow of the lantern, a shimmer of ivory, brown and black forms. Josh walks into the room, facing me in the flickering circle of light, his full

lips curved, his smile still tight. His large dark eyes reflect yellow splashes of light, his dark hair falls loosely, the dusk hiding the knots and tangles. Eliza or not Eliza, what I see moves me profoundly.

"Eliz.. Josh... Come..." I open my arms and draw this creature close. My own lips fall hard upon those before me. I embrace my creation, my arms wrapt tight, my loins hard...

V

They told us we were not sent to Point Puer to be punished but to be educated. If that be so, then education hurts as much as do punishment. We were all to learn a trade for when we leave: timber work it were for me, and that I did like. But that were all I did like.

The rules at Point Puer were harsh. My teachers were cruel bastards to a man. There be one teacher who had an eye for the prettier lads, and when he turned his foul gaze in my direction, I were proper scared. Those who had been defiled by him were shamed, broken in spirit and in body. He liked specially to hurt, I were told. Two lads had jumped off the cliffs at Point Puer, and we unfortunates who remained knew why.

He gave orders that made no sense, so those of us he chose were made to look as disobedient. It were like this:

"What's this, Wilson? I asked thee for the adze!"

"But Sir, I thought I heard you say the awl." He did say the awl but it were hopeless to say so; it were hopeless say anything; it were hopeless to say nothing. He were on heat and a flogging were on the way, unless I yielded and that I would not.

"Then a taste of the cat, I think. *Shirt! Tree!*" he commanded in shrill barks, like a vicious terrier. Bare backed, I would hug the tree as tight as could be, as the pain ran straight through me into the wood, that way. By rights he should of used a cane, but no, for the likes of us it were the cat, like we were convicts proper.

I were determined not to be mauled and invaded by this devil, so I were flogged many times over the next two years, so I were seen as bad. My tormenter, Mr. Smythe, enjoyed as much the beating as the buggery, whichever I chose were fine by him and the fact that I without fail chose the beating he cared not one whit. There were plenty of other poor lads who chose the other. Thanks to Mr. Smythe and the reputation my choice of virtue had made for me, my next step was ticket-of-leave, not true freedom as should be so. That were the price I paid for an undefiled arse.

I were placed in a convict work gang because of my "bad record". On probation they called it. We were first based at Saltwater River, roving by day to spot the likely timbers, and camping by night. Then the Commandant heard tell of fine timber north, in Forestier, beyond the line of dogs that guarded Eagle Hawk Neck. Lieutenant Briggs, who were in charge of our camp, told us we were to go and find it.

He detailed our assignments. "Mr. Trumper, you are the best bushman here, and that you'll need to be I've no doubt. You have the hardest section to reconnoitre: North-east and cross Blackman's Rivulet up to the coast itself. The rest will stay South of McGregor Peak until we have your report. You'll need to travel light, and move fast, so choose two of the men, and God speed."

Mr. Trumper made a show of looking up and down the line of men, but his eye fell first and last on me. "I'll take Wilson, Sir, as he's the best at scoutin' timbers...", – that much were true, – "but begging your pardon, Sir, in this kind of country two travels better'n three... So with your permission, Sir, I'll just take Wilson."

Now this were nonsense, the smallest gang should always be three as common sense must make plain, but plain it were not to honest Lieutenant Briggs. So with "Well, well, I suppose you know your business best.." we found ourselves on our way, me carrying provisions rolled in two blankets, Mr. Trumper carrying axe, musket, and swinging at his belt, as badge of office like, a cat-o'-nine-tails.

Mr. Trumper were a large man, dark bushy beard, and piercing black eyes; fearsome he were. He spoke little else but of the bush, and many a trick did he teach me, and for that at least I were grateful. We covered only about four miles that day, which placed us northwards of McGregor Peak, beside Blackman's Rivulet, a fine place whereat to camp. Mr. Trumper ordered me to light a fire and prepare the meal, while he sat on the bank of the rivulet, feet in the water, puffing on the foul stump of a churchwarden pipe.

We ate in silence. After, I stripped some fresh stringybark and made a serviceable lean-to in case of rain. I started to dig two hip-holes, one for him, one for me.

"Save your efforts, lad. Y're sleeping with me. Tonight and every night."

"No, if you please Mr. Trumper, that I will not do."

"You'll do as I fuckin' say," and so saying, he strode over and smashed a mighty blow across my face that sent me reeling into the scrub. In a trice, he grabbed me by the shirt front and threw me to the ground, hard by our humpy. I'll not dwell on that night. I was truly mortified, not by the pain, which were real indeed, but that my inner being had been invaded, like by a cruel army, and my spirit laid waste, my soul damned.

The next afternoon, despite my severe discomfort in walking, we reached our destination chosen only yesterday, yet it felt like it were so long ago, when I were a young lad, not the ruined shell I now am. Knowing what were in store for me tonight, and all the next nights, I knew I had to kill Trumper, and that right soon.

In truth, it were easy. After we had eaten, and he sat sucking his stinking pipe, I secreted a knife under my shirt while cleaning the mess gear. Feigning willingness, I fell to my side of the blanket before dusk had fallen. He smoked a few moments longer, then grunted like some foul animal, threw off his clothes, and lurched naked over to our common bed. As he lay down, I wasted no time. I plunged the knife into his belly up to the hilt, and sprang from the blanket, clutching the knife still.

He bellowed with pain, shrieking words that would not come, doubling over as his guts spilled out, like huge red and grey sausages. I feel shame at what I did next. I spied his cat, and dying as he surely was and in great pain too, I kicked him over, flat on his ruptured stomach, and flailed his back savagely, with all the strength I could muster, shouting curses on the names, Smythe and Trumper. My years of torment erupted in a volcano of hate and blood, that did not subside until his back were as bloody as his torn guts. I thought to assault him with the handle of his cat in like manner to his assault upon me, but that I could not in the end bring myself to do.

But still he lived, a slobbering, bloody, moaning mess. Was it kindness, or revenge still? I know not. My final act was to pass his now red-sodden cat under his neck, into which circle I thrust the handle, slippery with blood, and spun as rapidly as my shaking, blood-soaked hands would permit. In moments, all remnants of life were choked from the bloody, torn sack beneath me.

I washed the monster's cursed blood from me. I built a large fire, away from the terrible scene, and lay shivering before it, not from cold, but from my afflictions of spirit. The enormity of my act now came home to me. What was minutes ago so obvious and just, was now, were I to be caught, enough to get me topped...

I was rudely awakened by a fearsome noise; a howling, spitting, growl that put the fear of God into me. I lay frozen, not daring to move; and then I fell back easy. Devils! Those vicious, little dog-like creatures with massive jaws. But it was not me they were after; it was the carrion that was once my accursed companion.

The scene of Trumper's requital were truly an amazing sight. One devil had bitten off Trumper's arm at the forearm, another had the hand of that same arm in its mouth, pulling in a gruesome tug-of-war, their competitive rage the reason for the hideous caterwauling that had awakened me.

I had oft heard and on occasion seen these vicious little creatures. It were Trumper himself who had told me that devils would demolish without trace a man's body within three days: "Them jaws'll crush a bone as thick as a fist, to be sure." Although some seven convicts had escaped Port Arthur over the years, none had crossed the Neck, yet southwards from that line no bodies did they ever find. "It be the devils as got 'em," Trumper affirmed. "Once they be helpless or dead, them little bastards chew 'em up bones, boots, 'n' all."

As the devils were now getting Trumper. The arm had now disappeared; as also, I noted with grim joy, had that wicked instrument of my defilement. But I had disturbed them, and their bellies now full of Trumper, they vanished into the bush.

My gruesome avengers left me strangely cheered. Mark this, Josh, thought I, you are not due back for a good four days. Did you not say, friend Trumper, that in three days they'd clean up a full grown man, boots and all? Might I not emerge from this as innocent in law as I felt in spirit? The manner of Trumper's death had assuaged the terrible wrong he had done me. His blood had washed the stain from my virtue.

I took Trumper's musket deep into the bush and buried it there. His clothes, still lying where in his lustful haste he had dropped them, I burned. The axe and knife I decided to keep. The cat I found still around his neck. I imagined the devils would dispose of that too in due course, but for some reason I cannot put words to I cleansed it, and lashed it to my naked thigh, invisible to others but a solid reminder to me of my circuitous route from virtue to depravity and back.

I then camped upstream, to leave my precious scavengers undisturbed in their act of cleansing. When the last of Trumper disappeared into their furry bellies, so would I then arrange my return to camp. It took nearly five days, not even four, for my little black angels to sup the last of Trumper. By now my own food were all but gone, and with haste should I repair back to camp.

So it were late on the sixth day that I stumbled back to the camp. Lieutenant Briggs accepted my tale, with few questions. Trumper had taken the musket to go exploring, and did not return. I did frantically search, for as long as I had food. And here I were, injured, unkempt, and shaken with concern.

Early next morning I volunteered to lead a party to the campsite, insisting that after a solid meal and a good night's rest my concern outweighed my exhaustion. I thereby rose higher yet in Lieutenant Briggs' favour. Of course, any trace of Trumper found they none. I explained that after such a period of time unprovisioned, it was unlikely in the extreme that Trumper could have survived.

"And as Mr. Trumper himself had taught me, Sir, the devils would scavenge even a human body, and leave not a trace."

"Well may you be right, young Wilson. Perchance we have all learned. Had I not listened to Mr. Trumper I would not have despatched only two persons for such a journey. Had a third member of the party been present, it is certain that this would not have happened, don't you think, lad?" He looked at me shrewdly. Had he now too the measure of Trumper?

"That I do, Sir. But it were not your judgement that were at fault, Sir, if I may say so, but Mr. Trumper himself, may God rest his soul."

"May He indeed, lad; and if we agree on that, then we may agree I think, that your ticket-of-leave is assured, just as soon as I report to the Commandant."

VI

THE HOBART TOWN GAZETTE

14th December, 1845

SHOP KEEPER'S BODY FOUND MUTILATED

Hobart Town. Mrs. Lizzie Smith, a regular customer at Mr. Matthew Parker's shop at 171 Elizabeth-street was surprised this morning to find the shop open and no one in attendance. On entering, she found floor and walls spotted and besmirched with what appeared to be blood. Thoroughly alarmed, she notified the police, who thereupon found Mr. Parker's half-naked body, garotted, lying across a bed in a small back room, his back furiously flogged with a cat-o'-nine-tails, that same instrument having been tied around his neck and twisted with considerable force. The lower half of his body was clothed in a woman's dress, itself much bloodied and torn. His newly acquired ticket-of-leave servant, Master Joshua Wilson, was nowhere to be found. Police are investigating.