

THE LEAST OF THREE

Mary had been travelling with Jim for less than a year, and before that she had been tired, so tired, of battling for a cocky father and mother. The eldest of nine bush kids, and a wizened eldest, too, she had such a careworn hopeless face for an eighteen years-old country girl. She was tired of rounding-up ~~skunk~~ skeleton cows at daybreak, and of futile efforts to drag from them milk which they hadn't got. She was tired of minding Tommy and Billy and Annie, and all the rest of them. Of all the mending and the baking and the scrubbing and, when that was finished inside, of all the hoeing and digging outside. With never a word of praise or thanks, she had never heard of, much less experienced, the feeblest caress. Destitute of hope, but craving change, what wonder that she seized her first and only opportunity? What wonder, as a matter of course, that she calmly went away with Jim, the bullocky, without a word of goodbye?

"It can't be worse", she said to herself. "It might be better. And Jim ain't so bad either. Of course he swears a lot, but so does Father. And he boozes like Father does sometimes. And he jaws a bit but so does Father, and mother does always. And Jim has a bit of money sometimes, and that ain't like Father. And he's free with it, too, which ain't like Father, who never has any over after paying for groceries and dresses and boots for the family. But Jim has his team of twenty bullocks and he gets hard cash, too, when he lands his load. And then he says to me "Here's some cash for yer, Mary. Go and buy something nice for yerself". Call this a hard life? No fear. We're always on the move with the team and always seeing something new wherever we go.

Jim thinks I can yoke up a team of bullocks as good as any man, and he loves the damper I make. And he says we'll go to Sydney one day and see all the people and the theatres where the girls dance with nothing on them except mosquito curtains, and the bands playing in the parks, and the soldiers marching. My word that will be something to see!

So Jim and Mary passed on through that desert-like country which produced coarse tufts which were all that could be called herbage. Plod, plod went the cloven hoofs as the creaking yokes and the straining necks told of the heavy pull. On and on. Down into a shamed-faced entrance to a stoney gully which hid just enough dirty water for the played-out beasts. Then up again and with one more straining effort, they were out in the open.

"Woh! Woh there! Woh Billy and Spot. Steady there! Woh!" and the heaving beasts and the heavy load were suddenly still.

"There you are, Mary. There'll be no more tonight. We'll get these loaders out quick for it looks precious like a storm, and we'll need to be settled down soon".

"It'd be too cruel to wake him", she thought. "We've only ten miles more to go to Gungaree and eighteen bullocks can easy do that". Then out of very sympathy with Jim she cast herself down beside the tent and ~~wixx~~ cried ever so little.

The twittering of small birds in the bushes, the cawing of some crows and a red glow in the east roused her and she sat up with a start. "I might wake him now", she thought.

"Jim"?

A tiny streak ^{of sunlight} shot across Jim's face to show a large blue mark across his temple. It was only then that Mary knew the kind of sleep that Jim slept.

"Jim. Oh, Jim!".

It wasn't a wail. It wasn't a cry. It wasn't anything which might be expected to come from a girl or a woman. It was only an appeal-- a vain appeal-- to the only strong thing she knew, and she so weak, so very, very weak.

"Only another ten miles to Gungaree, he said, and I must get there soon," she thought.

She dragged him outside the tent and only she knew how. She rigged a couple of handy saplings against the tilt of the waggon gate and, with a strength born of despair, rolled him up, over and over just as she had seen him do when loading other inanimate things. Then quietly she yoked the remaining oxen, turned their heads towards Gungaree, mounted the waggon, and let them wander ...

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A little wheazy, petulant cry, and then a silence.

Another cry -- perhaps a little louder, a little stronger, perhaps impatient, and a big, bold crow, perched on the top of the waggon load, flopped away disappointed when he heard that strange cry.

Only another two miles and then Gungaree quite close. The bullocks sniffed. ^hThey seemed to smell Mother Evans' shanty in the distance. Another half-mile and they stepped out quite briskly. Very soon they were outside the shanty, where they pulled up suddenly. They knew where Jim always pulled up.

An idle ^{few} few around Mother Evans watched the driverless bullocks pull up. An inquisitive ^hit was who gathered around the waggon looking for reasons. And not reasons only, they found, for in the midst of death there was a tiny life, and though it lay there so perfectly helpless, it seemed still to triumph over the Grim Reaper.

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Then two big sun-burnt arms were raised toward the loading and, lifting a small bundle without effort, he laid it gently on the ground. He looked around and spying a large shady bush nearby, he once again lifted the little bundle and laid it on some sparse grass in the shade of the bush. Mary smiled up at him as he tucked a blanket around her.

"You aren't equal to work tonight, Mary. I'll make everything snug for camp now and we'll get an early start in the morning. Why, it's only another ten miles to Gungaree and there we'll ^{GET} old Mother Evans at the shanty to nurse you up a bit while I go ahead with the loading".

She looked at him in a sort of dazed surprise, the great brown eyes speaking of unexpressed gratitude, and stretching out her arm, took his rough hand and kissed it. "Good old Jim", she said.

He gave the tousled head a clumsy pat, and turned to go.

"Jim", she cried, "you won't be long with the loading, will you?"

"Long! About ten days at the outside".

"And you'll come back, Jim -- really you'll come back?"

"Come back? Well, of all the little devils you are. Come back? Of course I'll come back. You and me are spliced for keeps, Mary".

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How the wind howled through the tent that night. The lightning ~~flashed~~ flashed on the horizon and the thunder seemed to ^{cr}ash over the centre of the small tent. The restlessness of the tired man indicated that something unusual was happening outside, and twice he arose to tether down more securely corners of the flapping cover overhead. At last he settled down into heavy slumber. And beside him lay the small figure of Mary, with wide open brown eyes, shuddering now and then as a loud crash came, and praying in her own crude little way.

At length there was a short lull, and then with redoubled fury came the screeching wind; the lightning seemed more vivid and suddenly Mary clutched the strong arm beside her. Such a blinding glare, a simultaneous crash, and Mary knew that a big tree had fallen near the tent; then her heart stopped and she lapsed into unconsciousness.

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A great limb of a tree bulged through the old tent canvas giving entrance to the early light of dawn; that was the first evidence to half-opened eyes of the past night's terror. Mary raised herself on weak elbows and peered ~~about~~ about the tent in the semi-darkness. Jim slept, for Jim was tired. He had worked so hard. She would not disturb him.

Silently she crept outside, looking around the waggon corner, only to see two big brindle bullocks stretched in unnatural poses beneath the huge limbs of a fallen tree. ~~She~~ ^{She} hurriedly she moved back to the tent, full of ^{fear for} ~~for~~ what Jim might say when he learned about it. She looked inside. He was still sleeping.