

"There's not many people believe in ghosts now-a-days", said Bill Matthews in the bar one night, "and I didn't meself at one time, but if ever you'd seen one, like I did, and lost yer girl over it, like I did, you'd believe in them right enough, specially if yer seen six foot of one of them coming at yer".

"Tell us about it", I said, for Bill was always ready for a good yarn, even if most of them were far-fetched.

"Well this is a true yarn, mind you, and there's nothing funny about it, so you'd better not laugh at it".

We promised Bill we would take his story seriously, for we could see that he would be annoyed if we didn't and he had a short temper and weighed about fifteen stone.

"Tey was holdin' races at a pace the other side of Orange called Ironbark -- "Banjo" Paterson once wrote about a bloke from there -- right near the pub and there was a girl workin' there named Mary Carey I was shook on. And I thought a lot of that girl those days, but there was a young feller named Joe Palmer, a jockey who did a lot of riding around the bush tracks and I always thought he was the white-haired boy with Mary and I didn't have a show. But she was only stringin' him on after all, only Joe didn't find out before he died that day, when a colt he was ridin' for the publican ran orf the track and tossed Joe when he ran inter a post and rail fence. They picked him up with his face stowe in and his neck broke. He wasn't a bad bloke, Joe; a long skinny bloke as tall as me, only very thin.

"They went on with the races after Joe was carted away, and Mary didn't seem extra cut-up about the accident, although she was keeping the other women company in howlin' most of the afternoon. But all of them cheered up after supper with a few beers and it was decided not to put orf the dance that night because there was a big crowd there. And the publican, who was thinking of all the money he would lose if it was put orf, said he knew that Joe wouldn't mind, so they cleared the kitchen and the side verandah, and the fiddles got going and away they went".

At this point Bill stopped short as he reached for a glass someone had thoughtfully provided to wet his whistle, and he downed it in short order.

"Now I was never much of a dancer, bein' a bit outsize, and Mary wasn't dancin' either -- she was helpin' in the bar, so I went in and talked to her instead. Eye and bye I got her to come away and sit in the parlour at the back with me. There was nobody there so we sat on the sofa and pretty soon we got confidential like and I asked her hadn't she been a bit shook on Joe.

"No, indeed", she says, "there was somebody else".

I asked her who the somebody was.

"A lot you care who he was", she answered.

"Of course I care", I says. "You should know there's nobody in the world I care about like you. I love you, Mary. Dog't you like me a little?"

"Yes, I do, Bill, and I've never liked anyone else". Well then, of course, you know what a feller'll do when a girl talks like that, and they're by themselves. Boys, it was a treat to kiss that girl, and what a lovely armful she was.

"After a while Mary said she must be goin' for they'd want her behind the bar and then all of a sudden she turns white and says "How wicked we are, Bill".

"Why, Mary, what's wicked about what we've been doin'?", I asked.

"Just think, Bill, there we were talking love and kissing and cuddlin' and poor Joe Palmer lying cold and dead on a bed in the very next room to us".

"Good Lord, is he", I says, not knowing what they had done with poor Joe.

"Yes", she says, and then began to laugh and cry both at the same time like, but she has hardly started when I hears an almighty bump on the floor in the next room and then we looks up, and there was Joe! He was standing at the door wrapped up in his windin' sheet, and his face was covered in blood.

"Mary gave a screech that made me hair stand on end and flew out the other door and me after her like a bat out of hell. And was I scared! Wouldn't that have scared you blokes, too?"

"Yes, it would have scared me all right", I admitted, "but what was it, Bill?"

"Hell! Ain't I t'illin' yer. It was Joe! Can't a man trust his own flamin' eyesight?"

"And what happened after that?"

"Nothin'. Joe was dead enough when the rest of the mob come in to look at him after I told them what had happened, but they all gave me queer looks and none of them would believe me. That was bad enough but Mary wouldn't look at me next day after she'd recovered a bit from the shock, or talk to me either. She seemed frightened like.

"So I packed up me dude and came away, and I haven't been back to the place since".

Although we didn't dare tell him, we thought his story had an unsatisfactory ending due to a distorted imagination, but we couldn't get anything else out of him. And so the story would have ended had I not run into Hughie Guthrie in a Melbourne pub about twelve months later.

In my retirement I was enjoying the fulfilment of youthful dreams of visiting the scenes of famous gold-rushes of yesteryear and was in Melbourne preparing for a journey to those of Western New South Wales. I had known Hughie years before when he was droving in the Riverina and soon we had settled down to enjoy the beer and to reminisce. Hughie, too, had retired and was content now to put his feet up and watch television when he wasn't down at the local.

"And what are you doing now?" he asked at last.

I explained that I had retired and about my youthful dreams.

"Tomorrow I'm off to see some of the old goldfields in New South Wales" I said, "Bathurst, Orange and Ironbark for a start" --

"Ironbark?" he said. "Well, well. I've been there, but it's not a place I want to see again. I had an experience there that today sounds funny, but it wasn't funny then. Like to hear about it?"

"Of course", I said, thinking that I could top any story about Ironbark with that of Bill Matthews, while Hughie finished off his glass.

"I'd just delivered a mob of store cattle to a place outside Orange", he began, "and on the way back I made Ironbark just about dusk. Having a few quid in the kick I thought I'd be a toff and stay at the pub for the night instead of camping near the creek, so I put up my horse, called for a drink, and asked if

I could have a bed. But the place was full up - there'd been races there that day - and there was no bed for me, the bloke behind the bar^{Solid} I finished my drink and turned to leave, when the publican called me back - he'd guessed I had a cheque on me - and said he'd find room for me somewhere.

"He was out of the bar for a few minutes and when he came back he said "There's a double bed in the back room if you don't mind sharing it with another man. He's a quiet fellow and I guarantee he won't disturb you."

"I was dog-tired, so I said I wouldn't mind and sat down to have a couple of drinks and watch a dance that was going on on the side verandah. It was a hot night and I wasn't in the mood for dancing, and soon I went into bed.

^{askup} The other bloke must have felt the same way, too, I thought, for he was already when I went in. I didn't take much notice of him except he seemed pretty well covered up with the sheet, and I moved quietly in the gloom so I wouldn't disturb him. But after I'd undressed and lay down I found that I'd have to cover up too, or the mosquitoes would kill me. They were fierce! So I pulled on the sheet on my side, wrapped it about me and tried to go to sleep. But the noise of the fiddles kept me awake, and I lay there growling to myself for a while. I was just going off when I heard someone talking in the next room, for I had left the door half open and could hear quite plain.

"I was going to call out to them to get out or close the door, but when I heard what they were saying I thought it was too good to miss, so I listened. It was some bloke doing a mash with a girl and I couldn't help laughing to myself to think how mad he'd be if he knew that someone was listening. He was pretty solid with the girl, I could tell, and soon he began kissing her and calling her his sweetheart and things like that.

"I was going to wake up my sleeping mate and let him listen to the fun, but I was afraid they might hear me, so I lie there very quiet until I hear the girl say "Oh, Bill, and poor Joe Palmer's lying dead in the very next room."

"I shoves out my hand as quick as lightning and feels for my mate's face and, believe me, it was as cold as a snake.

"Hell!" I says to myself, and gave one bound out of bed, forgetting the sheet wrapped around my legs. I came down a hell of a whack and my nose hit the side of the bed and started to bleed like a tap. But I picked myself up and made for the door - I don't know why. And then I saw the bloke and the girl sitting on the sofa.

"They had one look at me and the girl's screech could be heard a mile off. I was still wrapped in the sheet and there must have been blood on my face. And then they cleared, and they travelled some.

"I got my clothes on quick - I didn't feel like going in for them, though - and lit out the side door to the stable. I saddled my horse and took the Dubbo road fast for five miles to Curdie's Creek where I camped for the night.

"But you'd have laughed to see those two hot-foot it out of that room. They really flew as if they had seen a ghost", and Hughie laughed into his beer.

I didn't think it time to tell my friend Bill Matthews's ghost story.