

With the demise of old Bob Brown in a slumbrous corner of Gippsland sixty years ago, there were some curious incidents in the small township of Greendale, said Grandfather, "and I had a part in one of them - Old Bob's burial," *he said.*

Some time previous to his death, the proprietor of a second-hand yard in the township had a clearing-out sale, and among the pieces sold was a secondhand bush-hearse, which looked something like a long box on wheels. It was bought by the local butcher, Tom Bowney, who was facetiously known as Napoleon. Bowney turned his purchase into a serviceable meat cart after painting it a bright green.

It had been the custom among the wealthier citizens to be buried by an undertaker in a large town twenty miles away, but at the time of Old Bob's death his hearse was undergoing repairs. Consequently it was decided by the sorrowing relations - there were only two, the deceased's brother and nephew - to hire Mr. Bowney's erstwhile funeral chariot and convey the coffin to the cemetery in secret lest the bright green vehicle should arouse derision - also lest a prejudice should arise when the meat cart went back to its usual occupation.

Arrangements having been made with parson and sexton, the imposing cortege left the former residence of ~~Mr Bowney~~ <sup>Old Bob</sup> at 2 am on a beautiful summer's morning. The party consisted of your Grandfather, who sat on the front end of the hearse with Napoleon, who guided his fiery steed, which was named Blucher because he usually arrived with people's meat orders too late for dinner. The two chief mourners occupied the back extremity with their legs hanging over the door. There were no weepers or other funeral trappings.

It was two miles to the cemetery from Old Bob's place, and the township was midway on the journey. In those days it was a rough road and when they reached the main street the front wheels stuck in a bog hole and, despite the strenuous exertions and the earnest prayers of the whole party, it was broad daylight before the mournful procession landed on sound going. The chief mourners were indignant and grieved at the delay, and instructed Napoleon to proceed at a less dignified pace. Whereupon Blucher was roused with aid of a wattle sapling and they rattled up the street <sup>at</sup> a merry pace until they arrived at the Red Lion Inn. There Blucher paused and, when Napoleon struck him savagely on the ribs, drew up close to the door and looked back sadly at his master.

The chief mourners alighted and endeavoured to urge the animal forward but they were not successful. In the struggle one of Blucher's far from dainty hoofs struck the door and this, added to Napoleon's unseemly language, aroused the landlord. He thrust his head out of an upstairs window and remarked in language approaching that of Mr Bowney on the butcher's early call. He then ordered three pounds of tripe, slammed the window and retired.

At length, to the delight of the burial party, Blucher condescended to move, but soon drew up at Mr Matthews' grocery. Matthews often and violently <sup>swore</sup> at being disturbed at such an hour, and ordered two pounds of sausages and a leg of mutton "for the last time".

Nothing would persuade the horse to leave his usual daily round to face the cemetery road and, in despair we continued our march around the blocks, the inhabitants cursing Napoleon and ordering joints alternately. Blucher called at

every house with painful regularity, and by the time they began a second round the ladies were stationed at their doors, armed with dishes to receive their orders.

By this time the chief mourners had lost all hope and the butcher was bathed in perspiration and rigid with horror. Even I, who had gone along to help my friend, Mr Bowney, was wondering what could possibly happen next. Meanwhile nothing could be more dignified or calmer than Blucher, unless it was the profound silence of Old Bob. And then, at the eleventh hour, the horse repented of his sins and agreed to start for the cemetery.

But the people who had arisen early to take in their meat saw the butcher's departure with indignation, and several of them followed the <sup>o</sup>ortege with a view to demanding bone and beef, and satisfaction. Blucher presently repented of having left the town but, by dint of terrible language and incessant belting with the sapling, they persuaded him to keep on towards the burial ground.

However, when they arrived they found the gates closed and locked, the parson and the sexton having gone home. In this predicament they were overtaken and surrounded by the crockery contingent, vehemently demanding its meat. One large lady after demanding in a loud voice her lamb's fry and sheep's head, became so exasperated that she hurled a large dish at the butcher's head. It missed its mark but struck Blucher at the butt of his tail. For the unfortunate horse, who had been annoyed by stupid humans, who apparently didn't know what they wanted, this was the last straw. He gave the front end of the cart one ferocious kick and then bolted, <sup>ent</sup> spilling the chief mourners from the back of the hearse among the expectant women. Napoleon and I were lucky to retain our seats as Blucher headed into the sunrise at a gallop.

When we arrived at the next town, poor Mr Bowney was in a state of collapse, and I was little better. How we didn't lose Old Brown on the way is still a mystery, but of one thing I am certain. His last ride was the fastest he ever had. The unfortunate horse's ribs and rump were covered by lumps as big as spuds. When the chief mourners arrived an hour later they were at the gibbering stage and rather than risk further trouble they decided to bury their kinsman in the strange town. We were all arrested for furious driving and fined ten shillings and the local undertaker prosecuted Mr Bowney for practising without a licence and he was fined thirty shillings.

To appease his customers Napoleon sawed the hearse in two, one half of which he used as a bones receptacle in his shop. The other half he painted sky blue and turned it into a kennel for his dog.