

MY MATE GIDGEE

**AN OUTBACK STORY OF
HARD YAKKA AND HUMOUR**

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An introduction to Tom and Gidgee: bush mates

What is a real friend? A real friend is a bloke who'll give you his last beer, or lend you his best horse, or who'll let you have first shot when you're hunting. A bloke who's got the guts to tell you when you're about to marry the wrong woman – that's a true friend.

Bronco Jackson, horse breaker, bush philosopher



Gidgee Barwon was going to be the first Aboriginal man to own a sheep station in Australia. Tom Dalton had given him that dream. Tom had dreamed of owning his own station since he was a little feller, and he had slaved and saved until he made it, buying his first place – a small starter's block of just 10,000 acres – when he was twenty.

It was in the outback – a different planet to the softer, more expensive country 'down inside'. It took hard, tough men to manage the marginal, dry, far-west spreads. Their women who stuck with them just coped the best they could; the legendary 'women of the west'. Many of them were quite amazing, the way they could turn their hand to almost anything – a tremendous asset to a 'battling cocky'. And somehow, those women who worked alongside their men were often able to retain their femininity, despite the harsh environment.

Tom went from strength to strength, eventually building a small empire in the outback. 'You can do it too, Gidgee. You can do it!' His encouragement of the Aboriginal boy, unusual in those days, was indicative of the size of Tom's heart.

'You no-hopin' white bastard!' Gidgee would say to make him laugh, back when Tom was way up there, really big time, selling 1000 bales of wool a year. Tom would roar laughing and thump Gidgee's

shoulder to show how he appreciated the joke. They laughed a lot together over several decades, while working their guts out, side by side, in the intense heat of north-west New South Wales.

Gidgee's father, a gun shearer, had brought him up to work hard, but compared to most blokes – even the most energetic men he knew – Tom Dalton was a machine. Instead of resting in the shade after lunch for a while, to recharge his batteries, Tom would keep swinging his ring-barking axe, the sweat spraying from him as each mighty blow sent chips flying from the mongrel scrub. When improving his land to make it more productive, his brain was simply not programmed to rest while there was daylight. If he was a dog, he would be a crazy kelpie sheepdog – like them, mad for work, and he would rather work than eat. There was only one way Gidgee could get him to pull up for a cuppa. 'Hey you woomba¹ fella, I'm puttin' the billy on. I'm rollin' two smokes, 'n' I'll smoke both bastards if yer don't pull up for a spell.'

In between shearing jobs, Gidgee knew he could always earn money helping Tom out with ringbarking, fencing, lamb-marking, whatever was on, and knew he could keep up with him. He had to. That's why they got on well; never had a blue. He was glad he had learnt to work hard from the age of fourteen, just as his father had. He appreciated the fact there was something in Tom's make-up that made him a match for that tough country near Lightning Ridge; something in his guts, his thoughts, his spirit. And in appearance. He just fitted into that hungry landscape: lean as a whip, fit as a kangaroo dog.² Fat lazy bastards could not last out there. Many men, even some hard toilers who just weren't lucky enough with seasons, or smart enough, went broke, and walked off those scrubby battler's blocks of the Western Division, the so-called 'reward' from the government to returned servicemen after World War II.

The hardy, battling, skinny sandalwood scrub reminded Gidgee of Tom, the way it clung onto the parched red soil, no matter what. Their

¹ Crazy.

² Greyhounds were used to hunt kangaroos.

tangled low branches were a bastard to push stock through, but Tom didn't waste energy trying to control the sandalwood, just concentrated on the coolibahs, box trees and belahs that sucked all the nutrition out of his black-soil country. It was better quality land for raising livestock, but needed a lot more rain to produce pasture; whereas the harder red country, which he mostly owned – 'shit country' many called it – only needed a few points of rain to shoot herbage. Copper burr and other succulents allowed stock to hang on. Tom respected the red country for that.

Although Gidgee was a black soil man of the Kamilaroi people, he also loved the look of the orangey-red claypan country. A lady poet, a friend of Tom's who went mustering with them one day, said, 'It's so ugly it's beautiful.' A funny thing to say but Gidgee understood what she meant.

Tom just said, 'Ar, yer bloody ratbag. Of course it's beautiful! Look how well these sheep are doing, 'n' it hasn't rained for two years.'

When she came out to watch the shearing, she wrote a poem about Tom and called it 'The Battler'. Gidgee loved to recite the first verse to get a laugh at Tom's pretended embarrassment. He also loved the way it described the country where the three of them rode that day, looking for stragglers:

'There he stands, this western man,
from north of the Barwon's flow
That hard hot hub, where the sandalwood scrub,
and strange broom bushes grow.'

Wherever Gidgee happened to be, in between working out near the Ridge or Bollon with Tom, he would recite that verse in his mind. Just the word 'broom bush' would bring a clear picture to him of the claypan country that looked so ... Australian, for want of a better word. Those crazy green spikes against the bright orange earth. And in contrast to their stunted, twisted trunks, the leopardwoods, tall and strong yet graceful, their spotted bark an invitation to the artist's brush. Gidgee often thought to himself, *If I could paint a picture, it would have to be a picture that moves and talks, for in the branches of the beautiful*

leopardwoods and myalls, white cockatoos would be screeching at the whinging circling crows. And where the grey lousy jacks sit arguing in the wilga tree, there'd be a nice shady spot for a man, his horse and dog to rest. The horse's tail would be swishing the flies away. I would paint old man emu and his missus nearby, striding across the wide, open claypan, their long skinny necks swinging as they looked about, not in a hurry, plenty of time. If danger appeared, they'd be running like the bloody wind, necks stuck forward, legs striding out comically. A king brown snake would be gliding towards the waterhole in a distant coolibah swamp, where pink and grey galahs were enjoying a good old yarn, and a family of blue flyers³ lie back on one elbow, like old men resting.

He couldn't draw or paint – he'd never had a go – but that picture that he would have painted if he could, stayed in his mind, like a special, much-loved piece of art that he had created and owned. He enjoyed looking at it from time to time, when he was resting. Also imprinted in his brain was a long view of the Barwon River where he'd fished and played throughout his childhood. These scenes would comfort him later on, when he was wrongly imprisoned.

The other thing he treasured was his mateship with Tom Dalton; a good feller, a bloody terrific feller. He had many good memories of working with him. They'd be mates, he reckoned, till one of them dropped off his perch. What a bloody larrikin he was! Bush-happy bastard, a bit crazy, mad enough to take on anything, tough enough to piss through a pair of moleskins, smart, shrewd, cunning as a shithouse rat, and brave. And work! The bastard could outwork a brown dog. In the white man's world, he became a success story, from just one rough battler's block, to being the biggest woolgrower in the whole Walgett Shire. That was really something, really something. Gidgee was proud Tom called him his friend, treated him like a friend. He was always welcome at Tom's dining table, even when he stepped up to a big flash homestead. Tom helped Gidgee and inspired him, and he basked in the warmth of their mutual respect.

Tom also had tremendous respect for Gidgee's father, Mulga George

³ Kangaroos.

Barwon, gun shearer, a legend, a gentleman. Mulga George named his only child 'Gidgee' because he wanted him to grow up strong and tough, which he did. The toughest tree in outback Australia, apart from mulga, is the gidgee tree – excellent for fenceposts and for cooking fires. Gidgee coals burn all night. Gidgee was also used in the old days for making the best boomerangs, spears and nulla-nullas.⁴ So gidgee wood was treasured, just as Mulga George treasured his fine young son. He nurtured him, guided him, disciplined him, so he would be worthy of his respected name. When the white men in the government said Aboriginal people had to have two names, Mulga picked 'Barwon' for his second name because he was, like Gidgee, born on the banks of the Barwon, near Walgett. The old brown Barwon was so special to them. It gave them not just water to drink and fish to eat, but also peace. When not in flood, it was a peaceful river.

Gidgee missed it when he was living out in the red dirt, hard landscape near Bollon, where Tommy owned a place in the '50s, or on his similar Lightning Ridge country. No rivers there, just dams for the sheep, roos and birds. As Tom always said, 'You can't have everything,' and the enjoyment he found in Tom's company made up for being away from the Barwon.

When disaster struck Tom during his middle age, and he became a homicidal madman, it was only natural for Gidgee to want to sacrifice himself to save his mate from going to prison. That was the Australian thing to do.

⁴ Stick with a knobby end, to bash enemies on the head.

The best part about the good old days is that they're behind us.

George Wells, a Lightning Ridge legend, shearing in the 1960s

Hell Plain Station, St George, Queensland, 1956

Were the skulls perched on the gateway to Hell Plain meant to be funny, or a warning? Beyond the gate, shimmering heatwaves rose above the desolate red claypan that stretched for miles. They were, like the ram skulls, anything but inviting or welcoming.

'You're gonna meet a bloody character 'ere, son. Tommy Dalton's a one-off.'

Gidgee was fourteen, on his way to his first job. He'd been a bit scared about meeting this white feller. He'd heard he wasn't a big man, just normal size, but strong from swinging an axe in the timber. They said he could be a cranky bastard; crack the whip quick smart on anyone who looked 'a bit tired' – bush people's description of a lazy or slow bastard.

'Just work hard and you'll be alright,' his father had warned him. 'If he catches you loafing or just standing about, he'll hurl a broom at you, like he did to a green rousie⁵ the first day I ever shore for him here. He never stops and he expects everyone else to work flat strap too. That kid wasn't sure what to do, his first day in a shearing shed, like you, but when Tom hurled that broom at him, bellowing "Don't you know what a fuckin' broom's for?," well, he caught on pretty quick

⁵ Shearing shed rouseabout.

to sweep that bloody board like there's a rocket up your arse, and don't stop till the engine stops.'

Handsome nodded his horrible boofhead in agreement as he rolled his smoke with one hairy paw. The other was attempting to keep the old Chev on the rough road into Hell Plain woolshed, between Bollon and St George, in south-west Queensland. They'd only stopped in Dirranbandi to pick up Tiny, the presser.⁶ In the back of the truck, the shearers were sleeping off a cut-out party at the shed they'd just finished near Walgett. Handsome's penning-up dogs were cuddled up to the prone bodies in supreme bliss. A bloke can't help noticing in the bush that kelpies crave to be as close as possible to humans, even dead-drunk shearers. They were all red, or black-and-tan dogs, tough as nails. Other sheepdogs like border collies, or coolie collies were too soft for the back country.

The bush is full of conundrums. Handsome's unfortunate appearance, the result of being dragged and kicked to pieces by a horse years ago, would scare most people on a dark night, but he was kind, full of humour, and when classing wool, was like a delicate, extremely fussy professor. He wouldn't be classing at this shed as Tom Dalton had secured his usual classer. He would be 'rolling' – skirting the fleeces for the classer, his fingers working like a concert pianist to remove the less-valuable pieces. He grinned that crooked one-eyed grin that could put Alsatians to flight. 'Yeah, Tom Dalton's a bad man stirred. 'e knocked me arse over 'ead one day fer readin' on th' dunny. Nearly spoilt me looks. Like yer dad says, work 'ard, an' fer Chrissake, don't sit down or stand still, or scratch your nuts, till that bloody bell rings 'ey Mulga?'

Gidgee didn't say anything to them. His guts were churning with nervous dread. So next afternoon, behind the woolshed, when he saw Tommy's head go down between the white, outspread legs of a lamb, and saw him suddenly look up and spit a testicle at him, he nearly screamed with shock like a woman – it was so unexpected. Tom

laughed at the look on Gidgee's face. The lad stared at the testicle stuck to his arm, the cords hanging like a piece of spaghetti, then flung it in revulsion to the ground. A big black and tan dog ate it in a ravenous flash. The other 'vacuum cleaner', a small chocolate bitch, gave Gidgee a wounded, pleading look.

'Keep catchin' 'em, young feller. Only an hour of daylight left.'

Bending to catch another lamb from the mob racing frantically round the small yard, he felt another warm, slimy testicle hit the back of his neck. Tom was already concentrating on cutting the tail off a protesting lamb, but the slight grin at the corners of his mouth told Gidgee he had done it on purpose again. Putting the lamb he'd caught into the cradle on the fence, Gidgee scraped the horrible thing off his neck and hurled it to the ground. As the chocolate bitch snarled and pounced, he looked at Tom, saying quietly and respectfully, 'Mr Dalton, please don't do that again.'

The man earmarking, Tom's brother Paul, exchanged a glance with the man who was pouring the sump oil and kero mixture on the wounds. Gidgee swallowed, thinking, *Am I going to get the bullet on my first day at work? A no-hopin' bastard already, at just fourteen?* Gidgee's dad was anything but a no-hoper, and he didn't want to let him down.

Tom grinned. 'Righto mate. You just keep catching those lambs and we'll get along alright.'

Gidgee thought joyously, *Mate ... he called me mate. Not such a cranky bastard as Dad made out.* He felt proud he had stuck up for himself. Pumped up, he went for the biggest lamb in the yard, a fat, wriggling horny ram, very heavy – at least twenty-five pounds. Burrs dug cruelly into his hands as he grabbed him, but he resisted the natural urge to wince or curse at the sudden sharp pain. During his lifetime, Gidgee had watched his dad dig burrs out of his hands nearly every night with a tiny razor-sharp pocket knife. He would have to borrow it that night. The angry lamb was kicking furiously and trying to hook him with his little horns, but he wrestled him up to the cradle, locking his legs in as he'd been shown, smoothly as possible so he wouldn't appear an amateur. He hadn't looked back at the white men; he just

⁶ The man who presses the fleeces into bales in a pressing machine.

wanted them to think he was a good worker, and a fast learner.

Pleased at how he had handled the lamb, he turned to look for another big one, to impress them further. Plop! This time, another testicle stuck to his cheek. The three men laughed out loud. Gidgee did the only right thing in the circumstances. He laughed too, and could sense the men were pleased he could take a joke. He left it stuck there for a while, and no more were spat in his direction.

By sundown, the young lad was buggered, back aching, hands aching, but he was determined not to show it.

‘Good work young feller. I’ll give you another start tomorrow. There’s always a few stragglers to mark when the shearers finish. Extra pocket money for you, ’ey?’

Gidgee nodded, grinning back at him, and watched him stride off in the dusk towards his big rangy grey stockhorse. Still full of energy after a huge day’s work, this wiry athletic man, about eight or maybe ten years older than him, didn’t walk; he strode, arms pumping, like he had a big mob of things to do and not enough time to get them done, and that was pretty right. While the shearers were relaxing, he would be taking the shorn sheep away, back to their paddocks, often a ride of several miles in the last, energy-sapping rays of the setting sun.

During the next fifty years, Tom and Gidgee would mark a lot of lambs together, and laugh a lot together, but Tom never spat another testicle at him. No-one bit them out any more, thank God! Men look back and wonder how they used to bite out hundreds of testicles a day and not be sick. And those poor little lambs, walking off stiff-legged, hunched over in pain. Some would lie down all day and their mothers would give up calling them and wander off, abandoning them. Gidgee hated having to knock little lambs on the head, and so did Tom, if the truth be known. No matter how tough a stockman is, no matter how many thousands of lambs he has seen and worked with, he would have to admit, if pressed, that they were a beautiful little creature.

Gidgee and Tom always enjoyed watching lambs playing, bucking and dancing in the sheer joy of life. Even during the worst drought, their joy was contagious, making both of them smile. ‘Gotta be cruel

to be kind,’ Tom said on Gidgee’s second day when he’d caught him wincing as he cut off the tail of one lamb with his big strong knife. ‘No tail, less dags, less blowflies. You understand?’

The lad nodded. ‘Dad told me last night why you have to do it. Blowflies lay maggots, ’n’ the maggots eat the sheep.’

‘Your dad told you right. You going to be a shearer like him one day?’

‘Yep. A gun shearer.’

He kept catching lambs as they spoke, mindful not to pause even for a second unless the cradles were all full. The other blokes grinned, but Tom’s face stayed serious as he looked up from his horrible task. ‘You do that young Gidgee. You work with your Dad, save your money, and you could become the first Aborigine to have your own property. The day will come when you can do that, and you want to be ready.’

The shock of his words meant that it took a long time for the idea to sink in, that this unbelievable prospect might actually be possible, one day. From the corner of his eye, Gidgee saw the other two blokes sneer at each other, as if to say, ‘Tom’s bullshitting’. But he could see the sincerity in those piercing blue eyes. He meant it alright. He was handing the boy a dream, a goal. Gidgee felt light-headed, almost giddy, at the very thought of owning some land and livestock. How wonderful that would be. He and his dad could work together, shear their own sheep together, sit on their own verandah at night, talking about their stock. He was so overcome with emotion he couldn’t speak, just kept catching and lifting those wriggling, fighting, burr-covered lambs. To think that a white man would encourage him, an Aborigine, to become like him, a boss. Then, an even more astonishing thought followed: could a black person ever actually be boss over a white person? Could a white boy be catching and picking up lambs for a black man? No, it was impossible to imagine. Gidgee put that thought out of his head, and clung to the dream of owning land as he continued picking up the white man’s sheep.

He didn’t dare speak to Tom, or to his father, about the dream Tom had put in his head for a long time. The dream was stored in his heart,

like a secret treasure. Sometimes at night he would allow himself a peek at it, a brief look into the future, usually just a flash in his mind, of a paddock that he owned, full of sheep he owned. He saw himself building his fences and stockyards, his dad giving him a hand. Then he would abruptly switch the picture off, before the yearning could overpower him and make him sad. His heart wanted the dream, that future, but his head was telling him that the dream was a long, long way off.

During that shearing at Hell Plain, Gidgee learnt many things, mainly from listening and observing, but Tom Dalton was also decent enough to pass on some knowledge of handling sheep. Instead of straining and struggling to turn them around in the race or pen, he showed the boy how to put a hand or his hat over one of their eyes to turn them, how to move them forward by squeezing their tail, what was the easiest way to catch and control them, and so on. Tom had just taken a shine to the lad, who was keen as mustard, and who was smart enough to listen and absorb information. The fact he had a big grin that lit up his good-looking face helped Gidgee endear himself to all the men.

Nearly every afternoon after the shearers finished for the day, right on time at 5.30, as they were seasoned to do, Tom would mark⁷ the late lambs that had missed the main marking. Gidgee was getting smarter at the job every day, and best of all, enjoying the camaraderie of yarning and joking with the men. Bluey had a good team of decent, hard workers and Tom made them all laugh a lot. Gidgee hadn't realised how lucky he was that he'd been picked to be his catcher until after that first exhausting, painful week, he added up what he had earned on top of his rousie's pay. He felt rich! On his way to being a cocky!⁸ Gidgee Barwon, the first Aboriginal station owner.

⁷ Castrate and earmark.

⁸ Farmer, owner of a property.

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**Men only think about two things:
their guts, and what hangs from it.**

an eloquent observation from Ruby Simpson, shearers' cook

The pandemonium of a shearing shed in full flight is almost as overwhelming as the dream, to a rookie rousie, of actually one day being the boss of a shed. The kingpin striding around inspecting the bins of wool, discussing the lines with the wool classer, surreptitiously assessing the skill and styles of the shearers, is the lord and master of a beehive of activity.

The thumping Lister engine competes with barking dogs penning up sheep, orders being roared at them, while whining, buzzing machines, struggling beasts, flying fleeces, and hyperactive humanity dashing about racing the clock, all add up to a level of activity and noise possibly only surpassed by a warship in battle. The overriding atmosphere is of speed and teamwork; no place for a slow learner. Everyone seems to know what they are doing, and the learner is tossed into the maelstrom to sink or swim. Just a few vague instructions before the bell rings, then the shearers spring into their pens, racing to be the first to drag a 'woolly' to their handpiece. Then the fleeces start peeling off onto the board, and it's on! Action stations! All hands on deck bar the cook.

Being yelled at half the day – Hurry up boy! Wool away! Tar boy! Rattle yer dags!' – had upset Gidgee at first until he learnt what 'fast' meant. Once he moved about as fast as any human being possibly