

MY MASK

For what little I know of the man behind it

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY

Norman Lindsay

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ANGUS AND ROBERTSON

Nomads in Melbourne

WITH THE DEMISE of the *Freelance*, our nomadic existence in Melbourne from room to room was resumed, and as Lionel's finances were now reduced to the *Hawklet* as our only stable source of income, one room had to suffice for both of us. At that time he was overtaken by an excessive restlessness; a sanguine and excitable fellow, he always had lived at the tempo of his blood, so that periods of inaction, where there was no immediate objective of interest, threw him into states of abysmal gloom. He had no intermediate state between extremes of exultation and depression; at one moment on top of the world and the next hurtled into its most Stygian cavern. To see him at a festive occasion, a glass of liquor in one hand and a cigar in the other, volubly pitching talk to a key of ribald humour, anyone would have thought that here, at least, was one who had achieved felicity. It was I, returning home with him from some such festivity, who was presented with his collapse into a hypochondriac limbo. Physically robust and gifted with abundant health, he could afford to indulge these emotional debauches which inflicted on him, in imagination, all possible ills of the flesh and spirit. He was forever locating symptoms of an alarming nature and testing out his temperature with a thermometer; an obnoxious instrument, which I have never permitted on my premises. In the days when we were much together I never took any notice of his relapses from one extreme mood to the other. They both derived from the same source; a gasconade of the spirit which got an equal gratification out of playing the carefree hedonist or the victim of a malign destiny bent on frustrating all aspirations of happiness.

One tribute of gratitude I must pay him in respect to those early pen drawings of mine. He had an amazing capacity for suggesting the solution to a technical difficulty, not in specific terms, but as a general principle. I recall one such, when I was in a considerable muddle over the treatment of some illustrations to Boccaccio, and he burst into the studio with the announcement, "I've found the magic word", and with a stump of charcoal he wrote in foot-high letters across the wall: "SIMPLIFY".

Straightway it illuminated the precise problem I was struggling with. And it is the key word to solving nearly all technical stultifications in the arts, and one that to this day I have to remind myself of, when I find myself overloading a work with redundancies. The puzzle to me was that he never applied to his own work the sound dictions he let evaporate in talk. He remains one of the best critics of values in plastic art known to me, though he has at times indulged superlatives of appreciation over the trivialities of Chinese and Japanese art, and the pleasing enough virtuosités of ceramics. Very wisely, he has rejected all metaphysics in relation to art as the constructive principle of human consciousness. This was a belief that in my middle years much bedevilled my own conscious processes, to the extent of leading me to write a muddled work labelled *Creative Effort* on its thesis; a work which annoys me whenever I happen to think of it. An artist has no business to tub-thump in words a belief which should be left to the stark statement of whatever form-imagery he selects for self-expression. Creative effort was one of the various factors which finally broke off amiable relations between Lionel and myself.

His restlessness in our student days, which on one occasion sent him off to the West Australian goldfields with the celebrated Randolph Bedford, was the means of awarding me one of the most invaluable experiences of my youth, and that was in taking over personally the *Hawklet* job I had ghosted for him. As official artist to that dingy little rag, I was made free of the lower sporting world, mainly that of prize fighters and their camp-followers, and the brothels which housed the ladies of their love-life. For me, those were purely a low comedy spectacle. Even in those days, when one was not at all fastidious about the girls one consorted with, I could not conceive myself going to bed with a whore. The major reason why I saw so much of the home-life of the brothel was that the editor of the *Hawklet* lived in one, very much as an Oriental potentate lives in his harem. But not on terms of promiscuity with its staff of breadwinners. His dignity demanded that he have a state-alliance only with the Madam, and

the Madam of a brothel is of an austerity very much that of an Abbess in control of a convent of nuns. She may have a gentleman friend, but never condescends to the drum's clientele. On that score, decorum is adamant. If she does relax on the strict code of deportment for a Madam, she has seriously compromised her social status. I have heard my editor denounce some slight slip of that sort from one of his Madams (he had several in my time) in the outraged terms of a husband cuckolded by an adulterous wife. He was a long, lank, pigeon-toed gentleman with outstanding ears, a double allowance of nose, and a bulging moustache almost obliterating a chin like an extra kink in his Adam's apple. I have used him as a character in fiction under the label of Conkey Tonks, and I got great joy out of him for the low life comedy I extracted from him, and great exasperation inflicted on me by him in return, as a confirmed "alterer" of my works. Like other editors of my experience, he assumed that a pen drawing could be sub-edited in the terms of a paragraph. He suffered on equal terms from his customary hangover and a deficiency of gastric juice, and he took it out on me and my drawings. It was his conviction that Lionel had fubbed me off on him as an inferior substitute for himself, and constantly held up to me examples of my own ghosted works as the high standard of art required by his paper. It was his stated opinion also that I was the worst artist in Melbourne—and on the evidence of the works submitted to his bilious eye, I have to endorse that opinion. We had a standardized row about them every Monday morning, in which, on equal terms, we gave each other the sack; a crisis invariably averted by his taking me across to the pub for a beer.

Conkey Tonks had not elected himself to the profession of journalism; a fortuitous event had thrust it on him. The paper was owned by his father, a printer, a noisy, bumptious, racketty old man and a notable whoremonger at the age of seventy. He had so constantly mulcted his staff of their full salaries that, by a conspiratorial agreement, they all walked out on him one publishing day and started an opposition paper. But before departing they wrote a most scurrilous, libellous, and strictly veracious article on old Tonks, even to recounting how he had been beaten up with his own umbrella by a couple of whores for bilking them of their just emoluments for professional services rendered. That piece of journalistic skulduggery by his absconding staff was a superb resort to the law of nemesis, for it was slipped into the paper at the last moment of going to press, and was abroad on the bookstalls before old Tonks discovered that he had published the infamies

of his private life in his own paper, thereby debarring himself from recovering damages from himself by an action for libel. It also added to his frenzies the necessity of scrambling a new staff together at practically a few hours notice to keep his paper going. That was how Lionel came to get his job on the paper. As I have recounted he happened to be on a visit to Melbourne at the time, and chanced to meet in the street the old journalist named Watty Watkins, who had remained on the paper when the rest of the staff had renounced allegiance to it. He had once sojourned in Creswick and was known to Lionel, and now, scouring abroad at the command of old Tonks in quest of an artist, chanced on Lionel, whom he rushed straightway round to the *Hawklet* office, and who was at once commissioned by old Tonks to get out the illustrated page in record time. At the same time, Conkey Tonks, who made his living in the lower sporting world by promoting prize fights and other sporting events, was induced by old Tonks to put money into the paper on some sort of partnership arrangement, and on those terms took over the august function of editor.

I have used the word "chance" in that event which jerked Lionel suddenly into the profession of a journalistic artist. As I have said, he had never intended any such profession, or, indeed, any other related to the arts. Like other members of the family, he had a faculty for draughtsmanship, but the bent of his mind was towards scientific research, as evidenced by his two years apprenticeship to astronomy at the Melbourne Observatory. All through his life he pottered with chemical experiments in such matters as extracting colour from flowers, devising a method of taking coloured photographs before the principle of doing so was discovered by others, and discovering the perfect painting-out medium to be used on etching grounds—a material badly needed in that craft and not yet discovered, that I know of. In this age, when chemical research is almost wholly bent on the creation of synthetic fabrics, how well off he would have been if he had taken to that profession instead of the laborious and poorly paid one of artist in a country like this. Money means a lot to him, and I think he has done very well that way, because he is extremely astute in the matter of investing it, and the men he has chosen as his associates in later life have all been financiers in a big way. Yet to this day,* and all through life, he has harboured a conviction that his destiny has been sacrificed to mine, and that he has been a sort of pawn moved on the chessboard of action in service to me and my work. It is not a reasoned conviction, but none the

* Lionel Lindsay died in 1961.

less a fixed one, and as I believe that such intuitions are never without some basis of reality, there may be some justification for it, and that it was begotten by the very peculiar coincidence that projected him into the profession of a journalistic artist. The time factors are so compressed in that event. At a crisis, an artist is wanted on a paper with no time to spare in quest of one. He is on the spot at the precise moment stage-management requires him to be, and gets the job. He is not a journalistic artist, he has never done a drawing for a paper, there are various other practising black-and-white artists who might be applied to, but he is elected for the position. And by that election the mechanism is set in action which very shortly lugs me out of the inertia of post-adolescence into the active practice of pen and ink art. This, I believe, is the basis of that intuitive suspicion on his part of martyrdom in service to me.

For myself, I do not believe that chance dictates the salient events of any life which has been dominated by an obsession to achieve a definite objective. Such events go on a constructive pattern only perceptible long afterwards, when time allows one to relate them in logical sequence to an attained objective. The Greeks had a thesis that such a logical sequence was under the guided control of the daemonic content of the human ego, and there is always a profundity hidden in all such seeming fantasies of Greek thought. It is not a theory that can be established, and therefore is best ignored. Lionel himself, an affirmed rationalist to all metaphysical or psychical assumptions, would be the first to reject the Greek concept of a daemonic intrusion in human affairs; and yet, under what other terms could he explain the conviction that he has been used by some such malefic intrusion on his affairs which was extremely beneficent to mine?

This digression intrudes on my establishment as a member of the *Hawklet* staff, and my introduction thereby to the home-life of the brothel because its editor dwelt in one, and because he was apt to be costive in parting up with my screw, so that I very often had to chase him up for it in whatever drum he happened to be the star-boarder at the time. The home-life of the brothel is conducted in the kitchen, from which clients are rigorously excluded. My editor played cards there with his friends, beer was always forthcoming, and the girls, in their professional teagowns and hair loose down their backs, lounged and gossiped and smoked cigarettes between calls on their services as wage-earners to the home, to which they were summoned by the drum slavey, an austere vestal in a cap and apron, who, like the Madam, administered to

its upkeep, but not to its special function. I had some status in the kitchen as the bloke what done the pitchers in the *Hawklet*, and I remember one simple harlot saying to me, "I dunno how you can go and look at all them murders. Me, I couldn't so much as bear to see a cat run over in the street."

Though it pleased me to assume an air of accepting that sort of thing as all in the day's work, my only contact with murders was to sketch the perpetrator of one at the police court, or some grisly exhibit from one at the morgue. Such a one from a notable crime of that era headlined as "The Boot Box Murder", which presented me with a mass of butchered feminine body on a slab and the head of a young girl, horribly distorted, hanging by a wire over it, assured me that we are so constituted as to look on at any brutal spectacle this earth may present. Horror may be insatiable as an image, but as a factuality our response to it is quickly satiated.

The prize fights of that era took place at a hall behind Mick Nathan's pub in Bourke Street, and as a member of the *Hawklet* staff I had my place in the press box on the stage, alongside the ropes. It was also my job to sketch the pugs for a forthcoming fight, which I did in a small box of a room off the stage. The pugs were very solemn over this ritual which got their "pitcher in the paper", and brooked no intrusion on its performance. I was drawing a heavyweight pug there one night named Mick McGovern, when a flap-eared ringsider put his head in round the door and demanded, "What's doin' here, Mick?"

"Get out," said Mick between his teeth.

"Gord lumme, yer might tell a bloke—"

Crack! That was a lightning punch delivered by Mick which knocked the intruding head back against the wall behind it, thereby jerking it back to another punch, which effectively disposed of any further intrusion from it. Instantly Mick resumed his stance, asking anxiously, "Am I right, mister?" while I could hear the intruder crawling on all fours out of punching range.

Prize fighting also enlightened me to the clinical discovery that hot blood is a palliative to pain. On my condoling with a pug who had lasted twenty rounds with two broken ribs and other severe contusions, he said, "It's you blokes looking on who feel the punches. We don't feel them much when our blood's up." I was able to confirm that assurance later, over an event late one night which involved Hugh McLean, Ray Parkinson and myself in a brawl with some larrikins, in which, with other contusions, I was awarded a crackling punch which blacked both my eyes. Beyond

an irritating sense of feeling that my nose extended for about a foot in space, I experienced no particular discomfort otherwise. A pair of battered boxing gloves were one of our studio assets, and Hughie and I boxed constantly, as I did later with Bill Dyson. Ring technique was a subject much debated among us.

There was one special misery I inflicted on myself over my job at the *Hawklet*. Pay day was on Saturday morning. With my screw, the editor handed over to me the various press-cuttings which were to make the subject-matter of my page. By editorial ukase, the page had to be at the office by eight o'clock on Monday morning. On Saturday night we held our invariable studio symposium round the model stand, with liquor purchased by levying a contribution from all present. At the price of booze in those days, one could get completely sozzled for a shilling, mainly on wine at the price of two shillings the half-gallon. That was all very well for the other students, who had all Sunday in which to recover comfortably from their potations. For me, Sunday was a day inexorably dedicated to labour with a head on me like a hot linseed poultice and a tongue furred as by a concoction of train oil and sandpaper. I never could last out those studio booze parties. The exhilaration imparted by liquor invariably succumbed to its insidious assault on my senses at some obscure point, on which friends deposited me on my bed, removed my boots, and went on carousing, leaving me to the nemesis of a hangover that made me groan in abject misery as I covered a newspaper-sized sheet of card with the various criminalities, murders, misdemeanours and accidents culled from the week's police reports in the daily news-rags. A disciplined will to work at all times and under all conditions is no doubt a first essential to the practice of a metier, but the principle was hard to maintain in those ghastly Sunday ordeals in which I perpetrated the *Hawklet* page. I never have been able to stand liquor, and my sobriety in after life, once the era of youth was over, was not due to a virtuous renunciation, but an inability to absorb it.

In these personal records, I have confined myself essentially to the action of my life, and have left out of them that concept of life drawn from its spectacle and from experience. This much only I must say of that concept which I have sought to define by a form-imagery in my works. It was an integral element of my being at birth, as all dominant contents of the human ego must be. All that one seeks in art and life is confirmation of this innate concept; and the works that most confirmed mine for me in those early days were Rabelais, certain plays from Shakespeare, Balzac's

Contes Drolatiques, Bohn's classics, notably the *Satyricon* of Petronius, the love lyrics of Propertius, and the *Idylls* of Theocritus; and, for their direct stimulus to the practice of my metier, the paintings of Rubens and Dürer's engravings. For the precise statement of that concept in words, there was Nietzsche. I got his *Zarathustra* in shilling parts translated by Thomas Common, and the exaltation I was given by that inspired work transfigured for me all profundities in life and art. One does not merely read such works as those listed above. The passion inspired by them is absorbed into the very substance of the ego. It was Nietzsche's "Questions of Conscience" which compacted for me the moral problem in self-expression I had to face:

*Are you one who goes alone, or one who goes with the mob.
This is my way. Which is yours? The way exists not.*

Intermezzo on a Theme in Idleness

I HAVE an illusion that the idle drifting of my student days was terminated by a whole series of events happening simultaneously, but that is because one period merged into another through a revitalized interest in life and work. The events were the drawing of illustrations to the *Decameron*; an effort to grapple with my finances by taking on all sorts of journeyman jobs; my friendship with Bill Dyson; and my love affair with Katie Parkinson.

It was to Lionel that I owed the stimulus which got me back to the industry I had abandoned on leaving Creswick. One night, after he and I and Hughie McLean had dined meagrely at a little restaurant in lower Bourke Street, we returned to our room in Sun Buildings, and there, talking over the technical problems of work, Lionel announced that what we all needed were exercises in composition. On fire with the idea, he suggested that we inaugurate a Composition Club there and then, and get others to join it later. The procedure would be for one to read aloud some episode from fiction, which all would illustrate; and reaching out for the first book at hand, he picked up a battered volume of the *Decameron*—an inspired selection on my account. He read aloud one of the stories and all three of us set about selecting a subject for illustration.

Technical ardour very soon petered out in Lionel and Hughie. After fooling about with a pencil sketch they got bored with the theory of composition and abandoned it to smoke and talk. I went on with mine. Presently Hughie departed and Lionel went to bed, but I went on working. I worked till the pallor of dawn competed with my lamplight, and only then turned reluctantly into bed for an hour or two of sleep.

And that remained the procedure all through the production of those *Decameron* illustrations. It was winter at the time and our room was on the weather side of the building; and when it rained, moisture ran down the wall in a continuous trickle. But with the lamp trimmed, tobacco and materials at hand, and my legs wrapped up in a blanket, I settled down to work in a state of exultation which puzzles me to account for. I've never had it before or since over my work. It was not due to any laudation of the illustrations, which I knew were in a hard and inflexible technique, but I was sustained by an ardour which kept me impatient for the day to end so that I could get back to the work. Delight is the most inscrutable of all emotions. I have had it over music and poetry, and sometimes over plastic art, but never over my own works in the spirit which begot those *Decameron* drawings.

I may add that the habit of working all night initiated by them lasted all through my early struggles to get some mastery over the technique of penwork. The night permits concentration without distraction. One is assured of peace, silence, isolation, and immunity from the exhalations of human conflict, which is temporarily asphyxiated in slumber.

I met Bill Dyson while doing these drawings, and I remember him almost stunning me with pleasure when he said of one of them, "I'd give ten years of my life to do a drawing like that." Fealty to friendship had little to do with his appreciation for my work, for he could, on occasion, apply dyspeptic criticism to it. We jumped into that friendship at one stride because we both had the same iconoclastic derision for popular morality; because we had arrived at that stage when the adventure of life is pursued with ardour; and because we had both read Nietzsche. We had another prime essential to a youthful friendship in that while we agreed on all intellectual valuations, we were at the opposite poles temperamentally. Bill had been born disillusioned while I was always the dupe of an illusion that the desirable was attainable. He never set out on any objective without forecasting its frustration, and punctured all optimistic assumptions with a mordant wit. In his concept of life's rewards and penalties, the penalties outnumbered the rewards on a ratio of ten to one, which is undoubtedly true, but a dispiriting conviction with which to set out in quest of the rewards. I contested it with the simple slogan that if one did good work something must come of it, and the only sound principle for getting through life was to let the damned thing happen.

Apart from such conflicts of the spirit we got an immense amount of entertainment out of the comedy of life in general,

and from each other in particular, because, having no reservations or reticences over each other's private lives, we dispensed with false pretences about their various ignominious or belittling exposures. At the same time, I am reminded here that candour in such terms between friends is only possible to the slapstick humours of youth. Indulged in acrid terms of criticism, as it was in the later disruption of our friendship, it can be bitterly resented.

As an antithetical content to a generally dyspeptic view of life, which considered it a fraud perpetrated on him without his own consent, Bill could be extremely gay and entertaining over life's comedy aspect, as exposed in pretentious exhibits of the human ego. He had an amazing facility in extemporizing nonsense in a parody of actors, politicians, stump-orators, operatic tenors, and the like sports of human identity. Lionel also had the same capacity for extemporizing monologue or dialogue, and when those two put on a mad act together, I have laughed myself almost into a state of exhaustion. I could put on a fairly effective character sketch of known identities, such as Conkey Tonks in conflict with old Tonks, but I had no wit in improvisation. Wit was a faculty of mind Bill had to a remarkable degree. He was never at a loss for a swift and acid retort in argument, for which I greatly envied him. My good things always arrived too late to be of any use to me.

The Dyson family lived at St Kilda, and Ted Dyson was the dominant head of it; though the Dyson parents were still alive, he was its mainstay. The old man had been one of the early diggers on Ballarat, and Ted, in his youth, had been a working miner, from which experience he derived his stocky, muscular body, and the material for his excellent mining stories. Later he worked in a factory, where he found the basis for his *Fact'ry 'Ands*, which in my opinion is a minor classic. His industry and journalistic facility were amazing, for he could turn out on demand any sort of printable subject-matter required by his profession as a freelance journalist. Too much facility! Though I think his mining stories and *Fact'ry 'Ands* will endure, the other novels, plays and verse he wrote have gone the way of his journalism.

Relationship between our families was later established by Lionel's marriage to Jean Dyson and Bill's marriage to my sister Ruby. Our friendship endured till Bill, Ruby, and I went to London about 1909, and there terminated; but of that later.

The familiar group of art students seem to have disappeared about the time of my early intimacy with Bill, but there was a

change to other groupings, notably one established by Randolph Bedford in the Ishmael Club. Its objective was discussion on notable personalities in life and literature, and opinion on them was put to the vote, which consigned them either to heaven or to hell. We met once a week at a pub, to dine and take over a room for the evening, so that discussion might be lubricated by beer as required. Bedford had written a ritual, to be chanted before opening the proceedings, and I had carved a joss, to which all made obeisance while chanting. It was good fun with good talk and lively argument; as, for instance, when Bedford put up Jesus for election to heaven, and had his candidate consigned to hell by all votes present.

My affair with Katie Parkinson began shortly before I set about the *Decameron* drawings, and had a good deal to do with the ardour that inspired them. Blood and spirit are one thing. It has long been my conviction that when spirit is seeking a release from mental stultification, a love affair will give it wings. It is that impact from without which frees the image within. A study of the lives of all those who have given themselves to creative self-expression will make that mechanism of cause and effect starkly apparent. Casual love affairs have not enough weight to release emotional intensity. They are a prime essential to the early adventure of life; they bestow self-assurance and self-esteem on the male ego, and they rid it of the belittling and sterilizing effect of celibacy. But as an emotional dynamic, a love affair must be dramatized by compact and conflict; by as much internal and external disturbance as possible; and brought to a crisis in action. My affair with Katie had all the necessary ingredients to eject me out of a pleasant enough state of inertia into a ferment of activity, physical and mental.

Her brother Raymond was given the minor stage part of making Katie and I known to each other. He was a member of a sketch club I used at that time, and we came together over a mutual appreciation of books. He edited some sort of trade journal, and lived with his mother, three sisters, and a brother in a house in East Melbourne; and later he took Lionel and myself home with him, and there we met the rest of the family.

I am reminded here of another activity at that time, which took the form of a small weekly paper projected and produced by myself and Raymond, which we called the *Rambler*. It brought Lionel post haste down from Queensland, where he happened to be at the time; Jack Castieau and others were brought into it, and it ran for a short time and then petered out. It was an amusing

enough episode while it lasted, but I don't feel like putting myself to the exertion of recounting its humours.

Another quite mad venture of that time was the collaboration of Lionel, Ray Parkinson and myself in the writing of a pirate novel. One of Lionel's hair-trigger enthusiasms was responsible for that, and he carried us along with him. He was to write the navigation, seamanship and descriptive passages; Ray was to supply the drama; and I, the low comedy characters. It had to be a conspiratorial affair. We could not write in our studio, which was constantly intruded on by others, so that a sanctuary of some sort was necessary to ensure privacy and concentration on the great work. This we found in a slum lane off Little Bourke Street, in the form of a small brick hut hidden behind the high board fence of an enclosure which harboured a lot of empty barrels. Barrels! That settled it; cargoes of rum for the Spanish Main. The yard belonged to a shipping firm, and when we presented ourselves as tenants for it, the shipping clerk, puzzled at our desire to take over such a derelict habitation, asked, "But what's the point of taking a place like that?" Lionel enlightened him as to its desirability by saying, "Why, it's got such magnificent old barrels", on which the clerk wilted away from further communion with a palpable lunatic.

Lionel's commendation of those barrels was not meant as humour; in a matter which interested him he could be quite oblivious to a disparity in mental states when communicating it to others. For my part, I heartily endorsed the taking of that small slum hut. It touched on a fantasy always lurking somewhere at the back of my mind; that of a desert-island escape from massed humanity. We knocked up some packing-case chairs and a table and strung up a couple of hammocks, and though Ray always went home of a night, Lionel and I frequently slept there, and did other works there; and our vanishing from all our customary haunts created a mystery which greatly agitated our friends . . . the solution to which is here disclosed for the first time, now that those friends have long since removed themselves from inquisitiveness over trivial complexities on this earth's crust.

Of course that idiotic novel was never finished. Its spiritual inspiration lay in exalting the scoundrel as the reckless free-spirit who wagers his neck against the ordinances of society. Where else is one to find a protagonist antipodal to man the herding animal?—man who is the safety-first product of the suburban damned. The scoundrel may slit a few casual throats but he does no harm to life. All the harm there is done by the self-elect of God, the

people's saviours and Messiahs who cause throats to be slit by the million.

Scoundrelism was much in vogue at that time both as an ethic and an aesthetic. Charles Whibley had written his *Book of Scoundrels*. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* was a bestseller. *The Buccaneers and Marooners of America* by Jan Esquemeling had just been translated and was widely read. Those sea rovers, from the Vikings to the last pirate hanged at Execution Dock, have added a richly coloured patch to the pageant of life that we can't afford to do without. In more recent times Douglas Stewart created his magnificent verse drama *Shipwreck*, from subject-matter derived from sea scoundrelism.

Two events wrote finality to my and Lionel's Melbourne days. One was my marriage to Katie Parkinson and the other Lionel's departure for Spain, both of which happened at the same time. That Spanish adventure of Lionel's was another of his hair-trigger actions, due to his seeing Madame Jansen in the role of Carmen. Straightway he was fired with an ardour for all things Spanish, which endured all his life. He painted a portrait of Madame Jansen as Carmen and presented it to her. He sought out some Spanish cork-cutters and started learning Spanish from them. He put aside every penny he could save to pay his passage and have something over to live on for a while, and was off, with some letters of introduction from his cork-cutter friends to their friends and relatives. In Spain, he lived among the working class people and became an *aficionado* of the bull fight. I did not see him again for some years; until, after my settling down in Sydney, he arrived from straying about Europe to marry and also settle down to make a living.

By the same author

NOVELS

A CURATE IN BOHEMIA
REDHEAP
MR GRESHAM AND OLYMPUS
THE CAUTIOUS AMORIST
SATURDEE
PAN IN THE PARLOUR
AGE OF CONSENT
THE COUSIN FROM FIJI
HALFWAY TO ANYWHERE
DUST OR POLISH?

CRITICISM

CREATIVE EFFORT

FOR CHILDREN

THE MAGIC PUDDING
THE FLYAWAY HIGHWAY

BOHEMIANS OF THE BULLETIN



NORMAN LINDSAY

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ANGUS AND ROBERTSON



J. F. Archibald

J. F. Archibald



IT WAS my friend Jack Elkington who brought about my meeting with J. F. Archibald and the *Bulletin*. He carried to Sydney from Melbourne some early drawings of mine illustrating Boccaccio, in which he apparently had more faith than I did.

He must have indulged in some effective work as advance-agent to those immature efforts, for the effect of his good offices was a brief note from Archibald enclosing a gag and a piece of verse to be illustrated. I won't enlarge on the technical anguish I went through trying to transfer a decorative treatment of pen-work to the realistic requirements of a joke-gag. The result was pretty awful, but apparently it found some favour in Archie's eyes, for by return post he sent me a cheque for a fiver.

Five pounds was a lot of money in those days; worth about twenty pounds of our debased currency today. I was temporarily dazed to discover that a couple of pen-and-ink drawings could command such a sum. Seven-and-six was the average price paid for a drawing by such journals as required them; jam-labels and hair-restorer ads usually went at half-a-crown apiece. When it was proposed that I should come across to New South Wales with a prospect of work from the *Bulletin* I

detached myself from Melbourne in a flurry of excitement and took boat for Sydney.

The great event of that year was the opening of the first Federal Parliament, and George, Duke of York, had arrived to open it. He put me to an immense amount of trouble by arriving in Sydney the same day as I did. Flags, bands, banners, and triumphal arches everywhere, and not a room to be had anywhere in pubs and boarding-houses. It was only after tramping Sydney all day that I got half a room in a lodging-house on Miller's Point. All that mob-turmoil meant nothing to me otherwise. I was agitated by one preoccupation only: the awful problem of presenting my manifest insufficiencies to the august inspection of J. F. Archibald.

It is hard at this date to convey the almost esoteric reverence with which Archie and the *Bulletin* were regarded in those days. The *Bulletin* was the only cultural centre this country possessed. It dominated opinion wherever people were looking for an intelligent outlook on life and art. It had startled into being a genuine urge of nationalism. It maintained a high standard in prose and poetry, and black-and-white art was getting in its pages a first chance of individual expression. Over all that loomed the mysterious figure of Archibald, sardonic, benevolent, ruthless, encouraging, a final arbiter of values, an omnipotent maker or breaker of reputations.

Archie was subtle; he knew the value of being a force rather than a presence. Though he built his paper on personality, he was careful to keep his own hidden. He dodged all personal publicity, never, in those days, allowed a photograph of himself to be published, and met very few people outside immediate contacts with the paper. In our small circle of writers and artists, anyone who had met him was questioned with passionate interest for details which might illuminate his mysterious identity. It was known he wore a beard; that was

all that I, personally, knew about him.

With all that in my mind I arrived at the old *Bulletin* office in lower George Street in a perfect swither of funk. I spent the whole morning lurking about the office before I could bring myself to enter it, and that was at the absurd calling-hour of one o'clock. Of course Archie was out at lunch, but his secretary, Percy, was there, and to him I introduced myself. He gave me a chair and a paper and told me J.F.A. would be in shortly.

The chair was behind the door of a small narrow office in which there was only room for Archie's desk, Percy's typewriter and a large cupboard, stored, as I discovered later, with specially selected MSS over which Archie used to chuckle like a miser over his hoard. I don't know how long my ordeal of waiting to be inspected lasted, but Archie's arrival exploded it effectively. He came in with a rush, made straight for his desk and, with his hat on his head, a stick under his arm and a cigar in his mouth, snatched up some copy and began reading it with avidity.

By that entrance Archie revealed the prime motive of his being, a passion for copy, but at the moment it embarrassed me extremely, as I hadn't the aplomb to emerge from my lurking-place and introduce myself. Percy did that for me by going over and whispering to Archie, who turned round to discover me with just the same accent of gusto with which he had pounced on his copy. I was potential copy, anyway.

After giving me a welcome, and a cigar, he asked me to excuse him while he sent off a few sticks of copy to the printer. Of course he saw that I was extremely nervous, and he gave me that interval to compose my ill-ease, which it did. Friendliness and understanding are emanations to which all decently constituted youth responds on the spot, and Archie had the art of imparting both in half a dozen words.

I sat and smoked my cigar and marked him with interest: an active, average-sized figure, a pointed brown beard, a big generous nose and alert eyes with the corner wrinkles of humour, and the whole spirit of the man on wires with vitality and interest in the spectacle of life.

It is a pleasing thing for me to recall that first meeting, which begot a friendship that lasted to the end of Archie's life and, for me, still lasts. I never had a disagreement with him from beginning to end, which, in the edgy, snipy, resentful world of journalism, is something of a record.

With the copy disposed of, he took me out for a walk, down George Street to the Quay, across the Man-o'-War steps and into the Gardens, through them to the Domain and out into King Street. We talked all the way — another evidence of Archie's ability to take measure of an unknown youth and put him at ease. I was just twenty, and at that age ideas refuse to fit themselves precisely to speech; but, such as my ideas were, Archie got them out of me.

I remember trying to explain a concept of life and art based on Rabelais and Nietzsche. He appeared to listen with sympathy, though I daresay he thought me a fair specimen of muddle-headed youth. I know now, of course, that he was mainly intent on trying to find out what sort of possible cartoonist or joke-block illustrator he had got hold of.

All through that walk he never lost the opportunity of directing my attention to the humours of character, in which I didn't need direction, for I was just as interested as he was in the mad gambits of personality displayed on the human exterior. I remember in lower George Street he stopped to chuckle ecstatically over an old woman in a butcher's shop . . . "By George, now, look at that old girl fingering a round of beef. Doesn't she love it — what! She's calculating how much it will cut for the family — eight of them, I bet, and the old

man's a wharfumper. The human belly! By George, it's the seat of most human aspiration. Fill it and you've beaten the struggle for existence."

Coming out into King Street he directed our attention to another item in the great human spectacle, the pleasing one of a young girl in short skirts with long curls down her back; one of those full-breasted, big-legged girls who sprout into full maturity about the age of fourteen. Archie loved looking at girls; so did I. No man is worth a damn unless the spectacle of femininity has an eternal interest for him. Of that one he said, "By George, now, look at that kid's legs. Now, now there's a pair of legs that could get a man a jail sentence and a lashing into the bargain, with half a dozen words to a policeman!"

That was to touch on another of Archie's obsessions: the iniquitous administration of the law in cases of alleged rape. In those days any blackmailing slavey could go into the witness-box and swear away a man's liberty and reputation on her unsupported statement. It was Archie's long fight against the law's malevolent wowsers in that respect that brought about its present rationality over rape cases. I know he fought one case over a number of years — seven, I think — and finally got the man involved liberated on the girl's confession that she had fabricated the charge against him.

I stayed on in Sydney and was established on the paper's staff, and I have to thank Archie's sympathetic understanding of my particular problem in black-and-white that kept me there.

It was not only my own uncertain craftsmanship I had to struggle with. Photo-etching in those days was in a highly experimental state, and was unable to translate any subtlety of tone or line. Macleod, the manager, was always nagging at me to turn out imitations of Phil May, while all my own efforts

were to find an etchable technique that would allow a full gamut of tone. It's a damnable piece of ironic humour that today, when etchers can hold on the metal an extreme delicacy of line, black-and-white artists have resorted to a more or less crude technique which would have been perfect for the etchers of those days, and have rejected all the resources of refinement placed at their disposal by modern etchers.

A capacity to love the created works of others is a virtue given to a few, and Archie had it in a supreme degree. All work of quality was treasure-trove to him. He bought and hoarded stories and verse and drawings which kept appearing in the paper long after he had ceased editing it. Pars were his own speciality. He would chuckle exultantly over a piece of wit and communicate it with gusto.

Apart from humour, he was able to infuse one with emotion where his own feelings were deeply stirred. I remember coming in to discuss the cartoon for next issue one Thursday morning to find him pacing the office in a tremendous state of excitement over a burning question of the moment. This was the hanging of a woman who had been convicted of her husband's murder and condemned to death. The woman was pregnant, and the legal quandary was to decide whether to hang her at once or wait till her child was born. The decision arrived at was that she should be kept in jail till the child was born and then hanged. Archie was in a ferment of outraged humanity over the business. "... By George, those legal ghouls are prepared to drag that woman out of a bed of childbirth and throw her to the hangman. Hang her and be done with it; that's bad enough, but to let her have that kid with the hangman waiting for her is damnable. By George, we'll have to have a cartoon on it strong enough to get through even their pachydermatous hides."

The cartoon as evolved was one of the condemned woman

in bed stretching out an arm to the newborn infant, with such terror on her face as an exercise in pen-strokes might devise, while a nurse stood beside the bed and the hangman loomed over it with his rope. At the foot stood Irvine, the Victorian Premier, watch in hand, waiting for the fatal hour to strike.

Irvine had refused petitions to reprieve the woman. I was told later that a friend of his, meeting him in Collins Street on the day that issue of the *Bulletin* was published, handed it to Irvine open at the cartoon, with a casual, "Seen this, Irvine?" He studied the cartoon with an expressionless face, passed it back, and moved on without a word. But the woman was not hanged; she got a life sentence instead. Irvine afterwards admitted that he couldn't get rid of that cartoon's implication of inhumanity in himself.

I am no humanist. But I liked pleasing Archie, and he was able to stir up in me at least an intellectual reaction to his states of emotion over the human madhouse. It was the same thing over the Boer War cartoons, which aroused such a frenzy of jingoistic exasperation in the public, and, along with the paper's general policy about the war, nearly ruined it. I think the public was right in this instance and Archie in the wrong. It has been, up to this, Britain's job to push civilized conditions into the earth's crude spaces, and a lot of wowseristic Bible-thumping Boer farmers were only obstructing a Roman occupation of the earth's surface.

All the same, Archie's moral courage was magnificent. He risked his paper and was quite prepared to risk his body in defence of his opinions. He was lunching at a restaurant once where his presence aroused a demonstration of hostility. Archie stood up and addressed the demonstration in terms of mordant scorn. "... By George, if you people got what you deserved you'd have your farms burnt and your daughters raped and your sons sent to concentration camps and your

country given over to a lot of boodling profiteers."

His physical courage was just as unquestionable. When two jingo huskies arrived at his office with a horsewhip to give him a trouncing he went for them with his long editorial scissors and drove them downstairs.

I could go on giving instances of Archie's intense pre-occupation with the spectacle of life, his shrewdness in summing up human personality and his quick perception of values in art, but all that would over-run a brief sketch of my own personal contact with him. As I have said, that endured up to the time of his death. His mental breakdown, which sent him into the asylum for a time, and from which he made such an astonishing recovery, did not make a break in our relations, for I visited him frequently at Callan Park.

I am never any good at times or dates, unless some special event fixes them in memory. Between the times when Archie left the asylum and when I went to England (in 1911) we met mainly on holiday occasions, going about in his car or out for the day in his fishing launch on Port Hacking. When I returned from England we got in touch again, and as I chose about that time to have a general physical breakdown, it was Archie who carried me off to hospital in his car.

I mention that hospital because it was there that I acquired a special debt of gratitude to Archie. A. G. Stephens had left the *Bulletin* and was doing his literary page for the Sydney *Sun*, and while I was vegetating in bed waiting to be operated on next day the *Sun* was handed in to me. In that issue A.G.S. had devoted most of his page to an attack on me and my works, and I cannot say I read it with any elation of spirits. That sort of thing is part of one's job, of course, but a critical trouncing is not to be preferred when one is in the last state of physical decrepitude. I had just finished reading A.G.S.'s splurge when Archie bustled in, full of gusto, to announce that he had

bought my pen-drawing, "The Argument", which was on exhibition in Bligh Street, for £100. It was the last big drawing I had done before falling into bed, and it brought me here a charming instance of the law of compensations, and reassured my conviction that no work is viciously attacked unless it has genuine value.

When I came out of hospital I went to the mountains to convalesce, and finally bought a house at Springwood, where Archie was a constant visitor to the end of his life. He used to arrive for weekends in his car with a basket of assorted foods, take charge of our kitchen and spend hours cooking. He loved producing special dishes for others, of which he ate very little himself. At his house at Darling Point he always had a most elaborate tray of delicacies left at his bedside at night, but it was carried away untouched in the morning. When I commented on this curious instance of abstinence in a concept of gastronomy, he said, "Well, well, it's nice to think it's there. If I don't use the next-door man's garden I can get as much as he does out of looking at its trees and flowers."

His favourite quotation was, "If I must die, let me die drinking at an inn."

It epitomized his idea of getting everything out of life to the last, and that life was better used in living than saved penuriously for no other purpose than to keep a carcass out of the coffin. If he did not put that concept into any recorded form of work he encouraged it eternally in the work of others. By that means he achieved in himself that concretion of personality which is the aim and end of all creation in life and art.

I remember a thing he once said to me which defined that guiding principle in himself. It was during one of those walks which we often took through the Gardens to the Domain, for he loved passing an hour in the National Gallery. Coming out

of that once he waved his stick at the prospect of Sydney and said, "Look at this place. It's full of rich men, and any one of them could write his name across it for ever by bequeathing it a public monument or institution, or endowing scholarships or the arts. But they carry money-grubbing into the grave with them and rot there forgotten, as they damned well deserve to be."

We know that Archie endowed Australian art with the Archibald Bequest and bestowed on Sydney the splendid Archibald Memorial fountain, the only truly fine monument the city possesses, and has thereby written his name across it for as long as it may endure. But he wrote his personality deeper on this country's culture when he sought for and published the best poetry and prose and draughtsmanship it could produce, and fostered in it the spirit to envision life in its own terms and not on any culture borrowed from other countries.

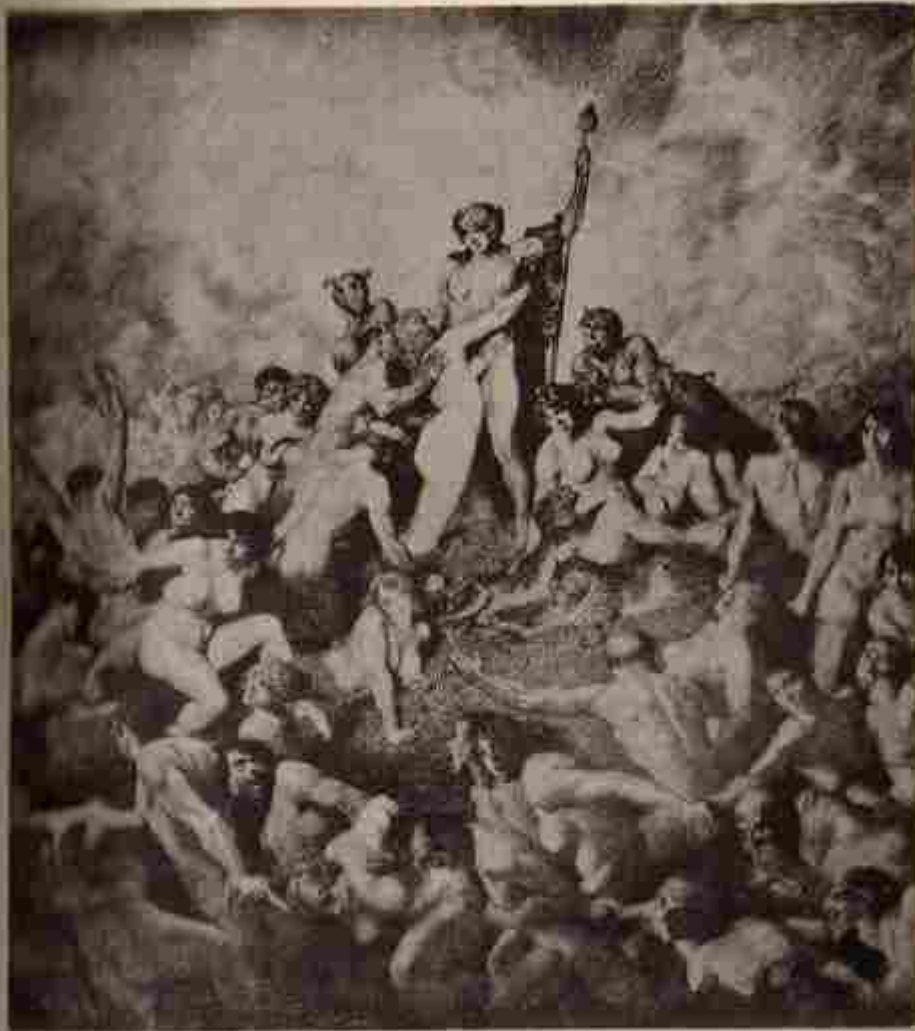
Archie was something this country had to have in its initial struggle for culture, or remain damned to the inertia of producing a worthless mob of human beings, to be taken over by the first piratical nation that chose to land an army here. He doesn't need any testimony of his value to this country from me, though I am happy, in a personal affection for him, to have had the chance to record it.

3

A. G.'s Saturday Night Symposium

ONLY the literary elect were invited to those Saturday night gatherings at A. G. Stephens's little room in Rowe Street, and though I was not one of the elect, I was permitted to attend them by A.G. mainly because I was doing a good deal of work for him in illustrating some of the books he was selecting and editing for the recently established *Bulletin* book publishing venture. The other regular guests were Victor Daley, Rod Quinn, Albert Dorrington, and Julian Ashton, while any visiting notability with some literary status was invited as guest for the evening, and was thereby allotted the only comfortable armchair in the room.

It was a small room, about fifteen feet square. One wall was shelved from floor to ceiling with books. A section of it had been cut off by a partition, behind which was a camp bed and bedding. Under the window was a square iron tank, the wooden lid of which served as A.G.'s writing table. Though his home was up the North Shore line, he frequently spent the night at Rowe Street, hence the bed, and the iron tank, which had a tap attached to it, so that he could make his morning ablutions in it. The small allowance of floor space left over from these various obstructions packed the company in knee to knee, requiring an adroit manipulation of the



Strenuous becoming grown self-conscious in the form of the rampant voluptuousness of the creator. (NORMAN LINDSAY : *Dionysos*.)