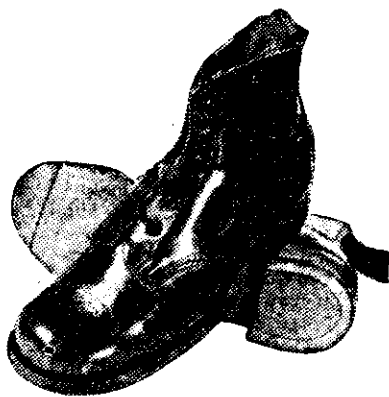




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THE GENTLE LAXATIVE

SHORT STORY

(continued from previous page)

fur of the opossums he caught each night in the traps he set where they worked. He would watch the bases of the trees for tracks, and when he saw fresh marks he set traps. Because he knew the ways of the bush he always got something, although sometimes it would only be a big bush rat. But best of all he loved to listen to Sailor. Sailor was Ben's adventure. Ben's wife didn't know Sailor; to her he was just a drunken ne'er-do-well. Ben learnt to keep quiet about Sailor. But every day he heard some new story about China or Brazil or Madagascar or Ceylon or Siberia, or some other place where Sailor had lived crudely but well, drinking, fighting, making love; using his senses and his imagination as Ben did in the bush, glorying in himself. And Ben was a fair mate, giving as well as taking. He knew every tree in the bush, every shrub, every bird and insect; every living thing. And like Sailor he gloried in it, gloried in his mastery. In neither was there any conceit. Their pride was the natural pride of craftsmanship. From the first night they met, leaning over the pub bar, they had clicked. They recognised themselves in each other. They were curiously similar for all that they had scarcely a feature in common. They were similar in action, in humour rather than in looks. They loved hunting and eating and drinking and yarning—and laughing with the women when Ben's wife wasn't looking. What was more strange they liked working, especially working together. They loved the smooth swinging rhythm of the axe, the synchronous movement of bodies, the skilled judgment of weight and balance, the nicety of timing that gave them mastery over the great dumb trees. Ben and Sailor, working to-day wholly absorbed, didn't see Johnnie until he was almost on them. Ben stayed his axe, wiping the sweat off his face. Sailor did likewise, the stroke falling rhythmic and neat, the pause coming cleanly. Then he saw Ben run forward.

JOHNNIE saw Ben coming and stopped. He grinned seeing the other man run. "One day they'll both run under a train together," he said to himself, "And whose fault will that be?" Ben caught his arm and he sat down and Ben called out something to Sailor, and then he couldn't remember anything except that it was raining and he was out walking and he only had one boot on; and the other boot was hidden somewhere, and there were leaves everywhere, and it was no use looking because there was only one boot and all the time it was raining, and it wasn't any use looking. . . . And the trees stood there like sentinels saying, "You can't get away. We'll get you. It's no use trying to get away. We'll get you, we'll get you, we'll get you. . . ." And then the showers came drowning their voices, and the boot went sailing down on a river of blood. . . .

THE mill houses clustered under the hills. The road from the station passed through three miles of bush,

mostly second growth. The road followed the old line, and the remains of the old mill made an untidy splodge of rotting timbers. Over the stumps of the cut trees bracken and blackberry grew fiercely. Parasitic plants flourished. Mosses covered the eroded roots of the living and the dead. Sinewy creeper strangled the gnarled trunks, reaching far into the arms of giant trees still standing. Survivors of first and second cuttings, they stood proudly among the rubble. They were like old men. Around each hung a spirit, an emanation, a will to be and to survive. Even the stumps seemed to say, "We hang on, and we are renewed. You lop us off, but we sprout. Our death is a new birth; in decay we give life."

The road came to an end at the mill. On the wall facing the road a humorist had carved the inscription "World's End." On either side, close together, there were five small houses. Behind the mill there were two shacks. Against two of the houses there were garages, one a big sprawling barn for the lorry, the other for the owner's car. Through the



"And then the showers came, drowning their voices."

open door it stood lop-sided, jacked up on an empty kerosene case: the track was hard on axles. All the houses had wood-sheds. Ben's had a fowlhouse and run, and most of them had small strips of garden. But where the gardens finished the bush began. In winter the tall trees shaded the sun; but then the sun didn't shine much in winter anyway. The low cloud hung over the hills. The ground went soggy. Up at the mill they threw great logs into the bog in the road to get the truck clear. Further down it was easier: the subsoil was shallow and the road tolerable. If you had speed up you could make it. If you didn't you got to work with scrub to give the chains a grip.

The houses were small wooden boxes with tin roofs. They had squares cut out of them for windows and slits for doors. They were bleached by the weather to a dull grey and the grey roofing rusted to a dirty brown. A mill only lasted so long, and it wasn't much use throwing paint around if the timber gave out. The smoke came from the chimneys all day. There was no wood shortage. Inside the women put up curtains, and used embroidered cloths when they invited each other to afternoon tea. At night the men came in full of mud and slush. They bathed, carrying kerosene tins of hot water from the copper in the wash-house. After tea they sank into time-payment chesterfields, listened to time-payment radios run on batteries; they looked through the sporting results in the weekly, and usually fell asleep before supper from sheer exhaustion. But

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