

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HILL

WHILE I was waiting for the cricket last night I re-read a collection of anecdotes from the place where I was born. In general they have worn well, though they are all echoes of echoes of things said on the goldfields 70-90 years ago. I particularly like this one about an illiterate whose wife had been a week away from home. To get

her back he asked a mate to write a letter for him, and when asked what he wished the scribe to say he answered, "Never mind the darlings and the dears. Just tell the old b— to come home." There is a classic simplicity here that gives it rank beside the best story I can remember from the First World War. A Royal Navy ship based on Sydney had received orders to go home—to the delight of most of those on board. But some thought Australia had not been so bad, and gave their reasons. There was a discussion, almost an argument, in which one old sailor took no part. But when the breeze passed, and someone said it was time to go below, the old boy made his contribution: "The best

bloody thing I know about Australia is that it is 12,000 miles away from my bloody old woman."

I don't know why the three "b's" give such a tang to an anecdote in English, but I think it is reverberation of Puritanism. My own profanity is like the riding of a man who was 30 or 40 before he mounted a horse. He never becomes a part of the horse, and my oaths, if I tried to use them, would be the most obvious of foolish affectations. In general I dislike swearing and avoid the conversation of those who can't express themselves without it. But I have had friends, two of them friends who were as close as brothers, whose conversation was not only unprintable but sometimes unrepeatable, but who were themselves of a childlike simplicity and goodness. The profanity of one of them was simply inspired—a flash in the dark that dazzled and delighted me, but alarmed me, too, if there was anyone else within a chain or two. I was always expecting a policeman's hand to rest on his shoulder, or a scene with a hysterical woman; but if either of those things had happened he would not have known why. I would die happy if I believed in the Judgment Seat and

thought that I would be counted worthy to stand on his side.

THERE are moments when it would give me no pain at all to see Elsie go through the mincer. They are the moments when I stagger up the hill with a bag of mangolds and see, the second I arrive, that she is not going to eat them; when I take her hay and she sniffs round for roots; when I leave both mangolds and hay and she stands sullenly at the gate looking for more of the potatoes I was weak enough to give her yesterday. In moments like those I could bash her face in with the bucket, knock out her teeth, kick her in the stomach, shoot her with rocksalt. I actually do nothing and say nothing, but go away a frustrated worm. Against her impregnable stupidity I am helpless—as every man has been who has wrestled with cows since it first occurred to man to steal their milk. From whatever angle we attack they are armed and we are impotent. We can feed them or starve them, batter them, bully them, alter their shape and their size, change their colour, breed out their horns, lengthen or shorten their legs. To get the last ounce of milk out of them we have to

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agree to their terms; and the first clause in the treaty is that we must always give way to them. I usually call it eating mud; but it is more than that, and worse than that. It is eating mud with a smile on our faces and a ~~case~~ in our hands.

I knew when I gave Elsie the potatoes that she would reject mangolds for two or three days; it had happened before, and the thought passed through my mind that it would happen again. But the potatoes were wasting, and it seemed like carrying weakness to the point of silliness to let caution destroy them altogether. I gambled on something she can never have—a fleeting moment of reasonableness. I lost. And as gamblers send good money after bad, never admitting their first stupidity, I took a further plunge this morning by bringing her into the garden for a bellyful of grass. If I had braved it out, let her sulk till hunger brought the sugar into the mangolds, she would have been eating them tomorrow or the day after. Now it will be the day after that. As often as the door opens in the next 24 hours an expectant look will come into her eyes, and then a dull sulkiness when no one goes to the gate. It is not patience, and not persistence, but the unblinking doggedness of a creature who can't change her mind because there is no mind to change. If I say—and it is a shock to realise how often I do, even aloud—"Then go hungry if you won't eat what I give you," she will not answer me. But if she does go hungry I will



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