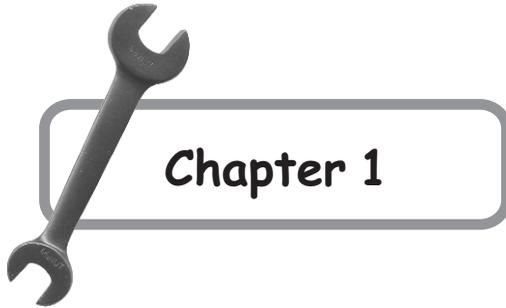


The Clue of the Hickory Handle



The Toomaroo Pioneer Museum and Historical Village was like a time machine. Many visitors to the place commented that they felt as if they'd stepped back a hundred years in time when they entered the gates.

All the buildings in the Village were old cottages and shops that had come from small towns in the surrounding farming areas, and had been fitted out with genuine articles from the museum's collection.

The big news today was that a complete sawmill had just been donated to the museum. The mill was a small one that had closed down many years ago so all the equipment in it was old-fashioned stuff.

It was morning tea, or smoko time as some members called it. My friend Ronnie and I sat listening to the discussion about the challenges involved in relocating the entire sawmill to the Village, complete with logs and sawdust. It sounded like a huge task to me but this didn't seem to worry anyone. It was the sort of project they enjoyed. Most of the members were retirees who volunteered their time and labour to keep the museum functioning. It couldn't have survived without them.

Some of the older men began swapping stories about tree felling and log hauling and other such timber-getting activities that many of them had participated in, back in the old days.

Listening to the men yarning about the good old days was one of the things I loved about being a member of the museum. It sometimes made me wish I'd been born fifty years earlier when I heard about how adventurous everyday life had been back then. These weathered and bent old men had been tough characters in their younger days. I'd recently started recording their stories. I was planning to eventually put all the stories into a book for kids of my age who never had the opportunity of hearing about such things.

The discussion this morning drifted into tales about the district's champion axemen, back in the days before chainsaws became common. It seemed that someone called Paddy Ryan had been famed for his woodchopping abilities. Back in the nineteen-fifties he'd won a valuable racing axe as a prize in the State woodchopping championships.

It was the first time I'd ever heard of such a thing as a racing axe. I turned to Ronnie, who was sitting beside me, and asked, "Ever seen one of these racing axes?"

He shook his head. "No. I've heard about them though. A good one is worth a fair bit of dough. They're made from some super-duper steel that's supposed to be able to cut through ordinary steel. The blokes who use them keep them sharp enough to shave with. The handles are always made from American hickory wood."

"What do you do with a racing axe?" I asked.

He raised his eyebrows. "Are you fair dinkum? Haven't you ever seen a woodchopping competition? Where they race each other to cut through logs?"

I shook my head. "It's not the sort of entertainment you get in the big smoke, mate. You know us townies: it's all movies and rock 'n roll concerts."

Ronnie rolled his eyes. "I don't know if I'm up to the job of re-educating you, Tip. It's like starting from day one with a

new baby.”

I grinned at him. I think he actually enjoyed re-educating me into what he called ‘the real world’. I’d spent most of my life in the city before my father’s firm had transferred him to Toomaroo. Dad was an accountant who didn’t even own a shifting spanner, so I’d never learnt much about practical matters from him. Ronnie, on the other hand, had been familiar with tools and machines all his life, thanks to his ex-farmer father, Virgil, who now managed the museum. Ronnie shared his father’s passion for old machinery and often surprised many adult experts in the field with his broad knowledge and understanding of mechanical matters.

I turned my attention back to the discussion around the table. It sounded like an argument was developing about which was the best make of racing axe. Names like Keesteel, Hytest, Kelly and Plumb were being loudly tossed about by the men at the table.

Barney, the peacemaker in the group, returned to the topic of Paddy Ryan, the champion axeman. “It’d be close on thirty years since old Paddy disappeared,” Barney said. “I was in the search party, y’know. Four days we climbed up and down them ridges lookin’ for him. Wild country down there. No wonder we didn’t find nothin’.”

“Yair, wild alright,” Tom agreed, in his slow drawl. “I done a bit of dingo trapping down that way, years ago. It’d be an easy place to get lost in.”

“Paddy wouldn’t’ve got lost,” another man said. “He knew that area like the back of his hand. Spent most of his time down there.”

“Doin’ what?” someone else asked.

“Cuttin’ ironbark posts,” was the answer. “He must’ve supplied half the fenceposts in the district. He had a one-man

sawmill set up down there.”

“Paddy never got lost,” Ernie stated. “He was murdered.”

This statement sure had a dampening effect on the group; suddenly everyone was silent and staring at Ernie. He was a man I wasn't sure of. Some of the things he said didn't sound quite right to me. I don't think he told lies; it was more like he sometimes got his facts mixed up.

Barney was the first to speak. “Murdered?” he said, sounding surprised. “What makes you say that?”

“Oh, I know a few things that's not common knowledge,” Ernie replied, looking mysterious. “Me brother's farm's right next to the old Ryan place, ain't it?”

“Your brother Harry?” Tom said. “He's dead. How can he tell anyone anything?”

“He was still alive back in the seventies,” Ernie said. “Back when the big train robbery happened. Most of youse'd remember that, wouldn't you? The one where they never caught the thieves?”

I saw heads nodding and heard a few murmurs of agreement.

It was the first I'd ever heard of a train robbery in the district, but then it had happened before I was born. I turned to Ronnie and whispered excitedly, “A murder and a train robbery! Right on our doorstep!”

“Take it easy, Sherlock,” he said. “It was a long time ago.”

“It happened on the slopes just down from Ryans' farm,” Ernie was saying of the train robbery.

“You reckon the robbers killed Paddy?” someone asked. “Come off it. Nobody in his right mind would try to murder Paddy Ryan. The bloke was built like a scrub bull.”

Ernie picked up his mug and drank the last of the tea

remaining in it. Nobody spoke. He sure had us all in suspense. Finally he said, "Yair, Paddy was a big man, alright. You'd've thought nothin' would scare him. But Harry told me he went over to see Paddy — about a week after the robbery, this is. And Paddy's sittin' at the table lookin' pretty upset. Well, Harry asks him, 'What's up Paddy? You alright?' And Paddy — he's got this sorta frightened look in his eyes — he says, 'I seen somethin' I shouldn't have seen'."

My excitement must have showed because Ronnie leaned closer and said in a firm voice, "No! I won't be in it. You're not getting me down the slopes looking for skeletons."

"But Ronnie..." I started to say. This sounded like the opportunity of a lifetime, a real mystery that was going to need his brains as well as mine to solve. But this was not the time for arguing with him. I had to listen to what the men were saying, to learn more about Paddy Ryan and the train robbery.

Ernie wasn't saying any more, however. He was just sitting there looking as if he'd delivered the news flash of the century.

"Well, go on," Barney said. "Tell us the rest."

"There is no rest," Ernie said. "That's it."

This brought a chorus of protest from the rest of the men, and various comments like, "Fair go, mate." And, "You've gotta have more than that."

"Don't you see?" Ernie said. "This was just after the robbery. The man musta been a witness. He probably told someone else besides Harry. So the robbers done him in and hid the body. It's obvious. Harry told the cops everything I've just told you, but they done nothin' about it. Struth! Call themselves detectives! They couldn't find an elephant in a outdoor dunny."

I was smiling at the image of an elephant in such a place while I tried to think about what Ernie had told us. If what he

said was accurate then it was amazing that the police had taken no notice of his brother's information. The robbery and Paddy's disappearance sounded too closely linked to be coincidental. And speaking of coincidences... Ernie's surname was Holznagel; not a name you heard every day. There was a girl at school with the same surname. I turned to Ronnie and asked, "Is Wendy Holznagel any relation of Ernie's?"

"I was waiting for you to ask that," he said. "She's his grand niece, or whatever — the grand daughter of Harry."

"It sounds like we should have a chat with her, don't you think?"

He groaned. "Oh no. Here we go again."