

Loyal Creatures

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Extract

Nineteen fourteen.

War.

Did I want to go?

Course I did.

Who wouldn't want to choof off to distant exotic places, give a pack of mongrel bullies what for and have the sort of experiences you just didn't get in the Cudgegong district.

When I told Dad I wanted to go, he tried to wallop me round the head with a canvas bucket.

Not too hard, I was bigger than him. But I was still surprised. Hitting people with buckets wasn't Dad's style. Plus, since Mum died, me and Dad were a team. Mates. You didn't go round whacking your mates in the head with work utensils.

Something was going on.

Dad glared at me.

'You and me'll be first in the trenches,' he said,

'if Germany invades New South Wales. Till then we'll stay out of other dopey idiots' wars.'

I squinted up at the blokes riding past. They didn't look that dopey to me.

Me and Dad were on Mindalee Station, rigging up some irrigation for their kitchen garden. Bunch of the station hands were heading off to Sydney with their horses to volunteer for the fighting.

My horse Daisy looked up from the carrot patch she was chewing on and gave a few snorts. Wishing the other horses luck, probably.

Dad gave the blokes a nod. He knew some of them from the pub.

They nodded back.

'Don't fall down a well, Ted,' said one. 'When we need reinforcements, we'll be giving you a hoi.'

Before Dad could reply, I spoke up.

'No need,' I said. 'We'll probably beat you lazy blighters there.'

The bloke grinned as he rode off.

I braced myself for another gobful of wet canvas, in case Dad was getting a taste for this method of arguing. But he just glared at me again.



'Forget it,' he said. 'You're fifteen.'

Technically he was right. But I knew several blokes who'd volunteered at fifteen. Alright, sixteen. And the tall ones like me had been accepted if they were good at lying about their age.

'I'm sixteen in five months,' I reminded Dad.

He frowned and looked like he was going to whack me again.

Before he could, Mr Conroy the station owner came over.

'Having a smoko, Ballantyne?' said Mr Conroy to Dad. 'It's not Christmas yet.'

Pushy blighter, he could see we weren't. I didn't even smoke. Mum reckoned tobacco was a waste of a bloke's wages. Being careful with money was always important to Mum right to the end, so I promised her I wouldn't smoke, permanent.

I think Mum made Dad promise something too, at the end. About us not going to the war.

'Be done today, Mr Conroy,' said Dad, whacking a length of irrigation pipe instead of me.

Mr Conroy looked at Daisy, who'd moved on to the peas.

'Pity you didn't finish earlier, Ballantyne,' he said.

'You could have volunteered with my blokes. Help sort them Huns and Turks out.'

Dad didn't reply at first.

'Tell those nags to pull their heads in, Frankie,' he said to me.

Dad's horse Jimmy had decided Daisy was onto a good thing in the veggies. I went over to roust them out.

'Got the lad to look after,' I heard Dad say to Mr Conroy.

I didn't hear what Mr Conroy said back, but while I was putting nosebags on Daisy and Jimmy, I heard grunting sounds.

Dad was hacking into the dirt with the big pickaxe, shoulders knotted and teeth clenched with the effort of swinging the thing.

That was my job. We'd agreed I'd do the heavy work. Dad's back wasn't the best. Old bloke's curse, he reckoned. He was probably right, he was nearly thirty-six.

I hurried over to give him a hand. And saw from his face it wasn't just the hefty metal head of the pickaxe he was ramming down into the dirt.

It was something else as well.

Something he was feeling.

That's when I knew he wanted to go to war as much as I did.