



LACUNA

Written and illustrated

by

Peter Suart

Peter Suart is wanted in all thirty-eight states of the Union,
dead or dead. This is the only known photograph, taken some
time between the Dustville bank job and the Frozeback showdown.

The Kansas Kid, Big Bill Ballantrae, Two-dogs Henderson,
Methuselah Cotton, and all the other Blackhill Boys were
gunned down at Frozeback by Marshal Goatlove and his deputies.

All bar one. A sighting at Glenrowan, Australia, is doubtful.

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A roadhouse came into view, and the freezing travellers made their way to it like bees to lavender. A biting wind blew in their faces. The man pushed the creaky door and stepped inside.

‘No doags!’ bellowed the barkeep.

‘But—’

‘No doags! An’ shut the blamed door! Man could get frozed.’

‘Find some shelter,’ the man said in a low voice. ‘I’ll get some tea and come out.’

The barkeep spat on the sawdust floor, and peered through his cigar smoke.

‘Good afternoon,’ said the man. ‘Two teas with milk, no sugar, please. And two rounds of buttered toast with strong marmalade. Coarse-cut.’

A burst of laughter came from the only other visitor to the bar, a little old man with no teeth. The barkeep looked at him, and then back at the newcomer.

‘Don’t serve no cissy ditchwater in these parts, trav’ler. Got roadhouse corn. Mebbe getcha cuppa mud, if youse still in swaddlin’.’

The toothless man giggled.

‘Coffee, then,’ said the man. ‘I’m afraid we don’t have any money. But I’ve got this.’

He fished out the whaler’s scrimshawed whale tooth from his pocket. The barkeep looked at him sullenly.

‘Ain’t a deal of whalin’ in these parts, trav’ler. Touch on the dry side. Y’all come far?’

‘Umm . . . We don’t know.’

The toothless man spluttered in his whisky.

‘Now, lookie here,’ the barkeep said. ‘Tell ya what I’ll do. Coupla cords o’ wood as need splittin’ out back. You get ‘em done good, and there’s a cuppa mud in it for ya. Mebbe plate o’ beans.’

The toothless man sucked his gums.





A snorting came loud behind them, and they turned to meet the rider.

‘Goin’ far, strangers?’ she asked.

‘Er . . . Could be.’

‘You don’t know?’ she gawped. ‘Well, there’s a fine state affairs, an’ no mistake. Y’all know what happens to folks out here as don’t know the road? Well, do ya?’

The man shook his head.

‘They gets ‘bout frozed, juss as hard as slug o’ pig iron. Yes they do. So y’all climb on board, and I’ll get ya holed up for the night. Jiminy! Youse lucky I came by.’

The man gathered the dog into his arms, climbed up onto the horse’s rump, and they trotted on down the road.

‘I’m headed for the Miller house,’ the rider said over her shoulder. ‘Bessy’s ‘bout to have her fifth, yes she is. Two dint make it, one got hisself killed in the gold rush, an’ one got shot up sumpin’ awful by Jed Lead. S’wunder folks keep at it in climate like this, but they do, oh, yes they do. Mebbe iss the cold an’ the empty spaces. Turn ‘em crazy sometime.’

The man nodded.

‘Might they, er, might they—the spaces and the cold—make someone lose . . . their memory?’

‘Mem’ry?’ the rider spat. ‘Mem’ry? Only time I came ‘cross case like that was old Jackson Corndust. Fell outta a peach tree, banged his head, and came to as the Duchess of Drycreek County. Convinced of it. Got all up in them crinolines, with purty little bows and bells, till sheriff hadda run him in the slammer. Course, that was back east. Don’t get no peaches here. Don’t get no nuthin’. Pig iron ‘bove yo head an’ pig iron under yo boots. The Lord only knows what we’s doin’ out here.’



'You can stay one night,' said Miller, 'but I wantcha gone in the mornin'. I ain't runnin' no doss house.'

'Thank you,' the man said. 'That's very kind.'

'Mind you get 'em some biscuits and stew, Elmer,' said the midwife, getting back on her horse. 'They's long time trav'llin, and not a cent on 'em. An' you mind an' keep that li'l doag hid, young man. Liable to be shot for supper on the road.'

'Shouldn't be on the road, if they ain't got no silver,' Miller grumbled under his breath.

'You see it done, Elmer,' the midwife called over her shoulder.

Miller scowled after her, and then at his guests.

'Well, you'd best come in and get some eatin'.'

Mrs Miller lay asleep with her newborn child, so her husband slopped some stew from a pot on the stove into a dish, threw a couple of biscuits into it, and dropped it on the table.

'Midwife or no midwife, I'll be hog-tied if any doag'll eat from a dish o' mine. You figure it out.'

He grabbed his pipe, took a seat in the corner and began working a length of wood with chisel and mallet. The baby began to howl.

After supper, the man ventured some conversation. He cleared his throat.

'Ummm, Mr Miller?' he said. The old man scowled. 'Umm, you're a carpenter, Mr Miller?'

'You simple, boy?' he replied testily.

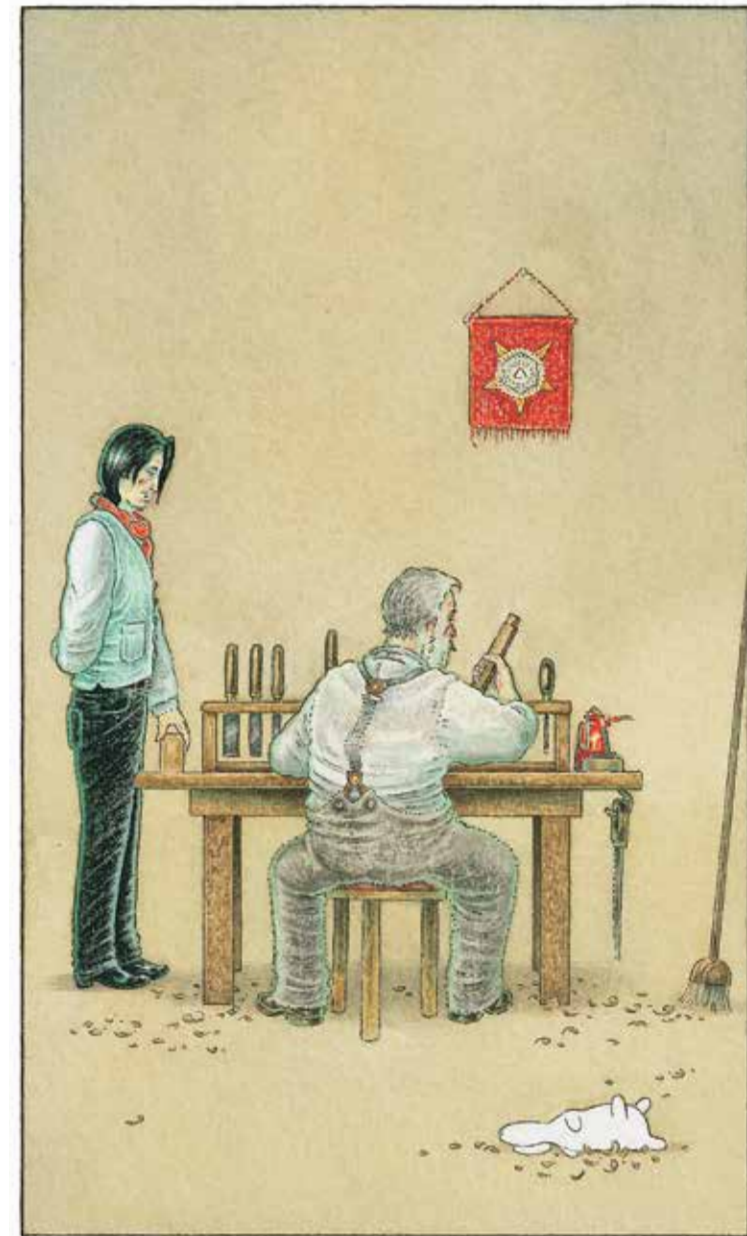
'The furniture is all fine work,' the man persevered. 'Is it yours?'

Miller could not conceal his pleasure at the compliment. 'My Pappy taught me,' he replied. 'He could join two pieces o' wood so's they looked like they done grewed together.'

'And, and do you ever find that you've . . . forgotten . . . how to do something?'

Miller looked at his guest quizzically. 'Forgotten? Now, how in tarnation can a man forget a joint when once he's learned him how it's done? When ya know, it's fer life, boy. Ain't no forgettin' 'bout it. You simple, son?'

'Fine work. Craftsman's work.'



Far away a puff of smoke trailed across the land. Once more, footsteps came behind them. The dog hid in the man's coat.

'Pilgrim,' said the walker, touching his hat.

'Hello,' said the man.

The walker looked at him keenly. 'We met before?' he asked.

The man shrugged. 'I don't think so.'

'If you wanna free ride,' the walker continued, 'there's a fine spot for hoppin' the train up ahead.'

'Shouldn't we get tickets?'

The walker looked away. 'Tickets for some, and not for others,' he replied. 'You in or out?'

The man looked doubtful.

'It's like this,' the walker went on. 'I built railroads all over. Built 'em with my bare arms an' a sledgehammer an' shovel, and got paid dirt. Just like my pa and my grandpa got paid dirt. Dirt, see? So, way I figure it, I paid my ticket, long time 'go.'

'But not our . . . mine,' the man said.

'You got money?' the walker asked.

The man shook his head.

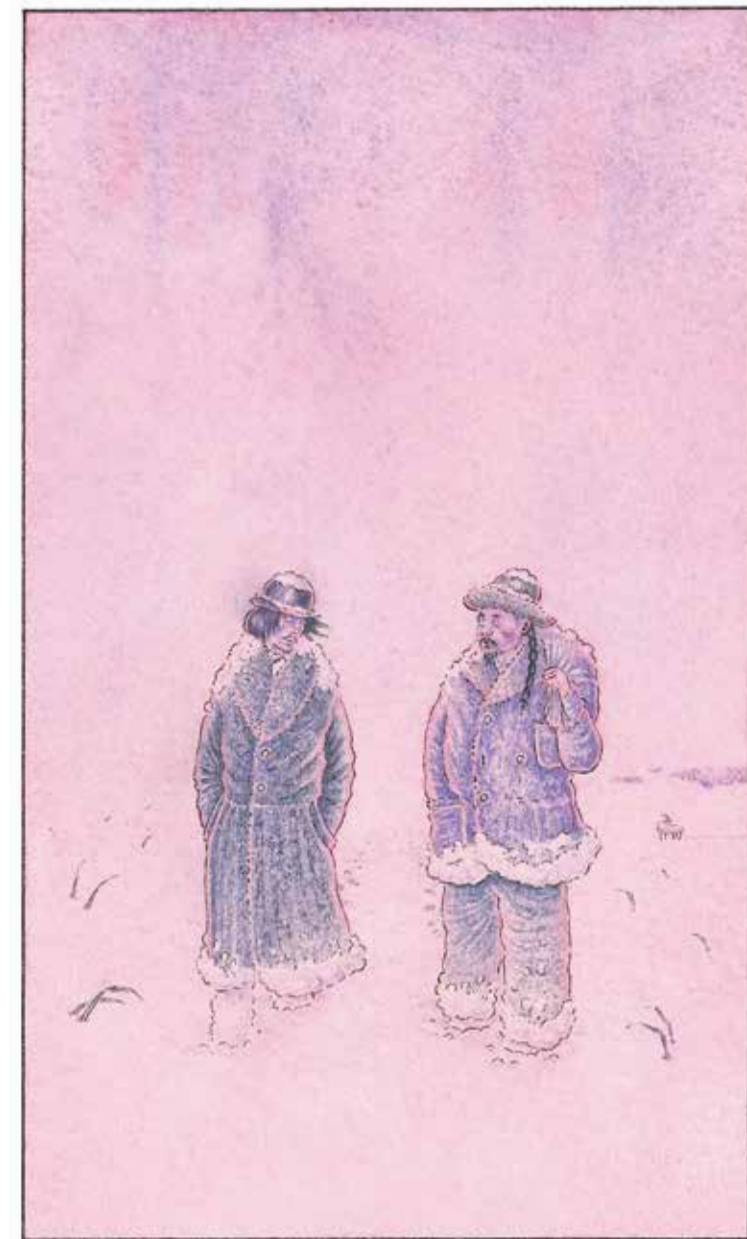
'Well, I gotta tell ya, pilgrim. You keep walkin' in this cosy part o' the world and you gonna be sleepin' perm'nent, juss stiff as a Springfield ramrod. And quick, too. Take my 'vice. Hop the train.'

And with that, the stranger trudged on ahead.

The man walked, hunched against the cold.

'Do the rules change when it's life and death?' he asked the dog.

'Rules?'



Outside, the land rolled by the rattling train, all white and grey and black. Inside the freight car the travellers burrowed into bales of straw for warmth.

‘Call me Kwai,’ the walker said.

‘Er . . . uh . . . Buck,’ said the man.

Kwai nodded. He pulled a small pouch from his pocket, and began to eat the rice with his fingers. He offered some to Buck, and soon it was all gone.

‘Do you remember your grandfather?’ Buck asked.

Kwai looked surprised, and stared out of the door.

‘Never saw him. My Pa came for the gold, an’ I was born here. Grampa worked hard for nuthin’ all his life, and left nuthin’ but his son and grandson. But he was strong inside. He left me that.’

‘That’s a great gift,’ said Buck.

Kwai nodded. ‘Things get passed on,’ he said. ‘A day, a month, a hundred years. An’ then some time they stop, an’ there are only little bits left that don’t mean much to no one. An’ then they go, too.’

‘Mm-hmm. So you remember your father, then?’

Kwai shrugged his eyebrows. ‘I guess so. Died when I was five. I have a kinda memory, like a tintype in a poor light somewheres deep inside. Kinda catch it when I’m not tryin’.’

The sun went down, and the travellers wrapped their coats about them and went to sleep. There’s nothing like sleeping on a train.

