JAMES TYSON, MILLIONAIRE

by Lady Fletcher

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The story of James Tyson, is in its way a romance, and far more worthy of relating than many of the serials that clog our television screens. It would make a very interesting series, educational and exciting.

It begins in a village in Yorkshire - Pontefract; one of those villages so different from our own, where the houses crowd closely to each other and to the street, where ducks swim lazily on the village pond, the half-timbered inn is the centre of community life, and in this case, the court house looks over the village green. On a sunny morning in April 1808 a worried-looking sergeant is striding down the street. In his white trousers, red jacket, black shiny boots and black shako, Sergeant William Tyson is an impressive figure. He is going to the Court House, to which scattered groups of people are also making their way, for it is the time of the assizes. Among the prisoners in the dock is the Sergeant’s handsome wife, Isabella. She stands, baby in arms, to answer the charge of petty larceny. This is described as “the theft of an article under the value of one shilling”. Now we face a dilemma. Do we use the bald description of her crime found in the criminal list in the Mitchell Library - “stealing so many yards of gingham”, or do we use the colorful story that is the family legend. If we choose the latter, we should have a flashback to the scene in the village street. It is the year of famine, and a child, tattered, dirty and starving is crying for food. Spurned by the baker as he passes by with his tray of bread on his shoulder, she cowrs in misery. Isabella, who is walking past, adds her plea, but she too is roughly repulsed. Angrily, she snatches a twopenny loaf from his tray and hands it to the child. For that crime she is to answer when the cruel and vicious sentence is passed upon her - SEVEN YEARS' TRANSPORTATION TO AUSTRALIA.

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Lady Fletcher is the wife of Sir Alan Fletcher, whose former Queensland electorate covered a swathe of the territory in which Tyson had interests on the Darling Downs. She is herself an experienced lecturer in historical subjects.
In 1808 Australia might as well have been the moon to which she was being sent, with as little hope of return. Her sergeant had sufficient regard for her and money enough to buy himself out of the Army and accompany her, as part of the detachment whose duty it was to guard the prisoners. Their three-year-old daughter had to be left with Isabella’s parents and they never saw her again.

Soon after the convict ship *Indispensable* nosed its way through the Heads into Sydney Harbour, William found himself the owner of 110 acres of virgin forest at Appin, near Campbelltown about 45 miles south-west of Sydney, with his wife assigned to him as servant. How they must have had to slog in the unaccustomed heat to clear a small section and erect the slab-built, dirt-floored bark-roofed shanty. With no other tools than axe, hoe, mattock and spade, that 110 acres had to be bullied by two people into providing enough nourishment for the family with a surplus that could be sold to buy new implements and clothing. More children were born to them, James being the sixth of twelve.

It was a happy home, but only a few stones survive to mark the site of the chimney - one deeply grooved where Tyson children sharpened their slate-pencils as their mother taught them their A.B.C., and a line of gnarled old pear trees planted by Isabella. We can only guess at the constant humiliations, the petty tyrannies they suffered and the social stigma due to the mother’s convict history. By the time James was nine the gallant William was dead, from overwork probably, and in due course Isabella married again, this time to a Thomas Clements who also had come out as guest of His Majesty. At 17 James left home to make his fortune. The only money he had to take with him was ONE HALF-CROWN.

**HARD APPRENTICESHIP**

His wages as a farm laborer were £30 per year and keep. After two-and-a-half years of this he left, taking with him £60 of his wages bill of £75. His next job was with cattle. Picture the life of this twenty-year old. He was a crack shot, so he lived off the land. His rations included wheat to grind with a stone on a stone for flour to make his damper. Often he would not take time to do this and filling his pocket with wheat, would throw some into his mouth as he rode along “gristing it on the hoof” as he put it, and washing it down with a drink of water. He rose at dawn and settled down to sleep at dusk, thinking it unnecessary to burn the oil in his slush lamp. He lived and thought and dreamed of cattle, learning his trade. Eighteen months of this, and he was ready to begin.

With his brother William, the baby born in England, James took up a holding and bought some cattle. Bad seasons sent them on the road in search of grazing for their stock, the Great Australian Outback
Occupation. In their worry they forgot to renew their squatting licence and someone else acquired it; the banks failed and they lost the nest-egg so thriftily left for the future; and if that was not enough, the cattle found some poisonous herbage, and all but a few died. So at the age of 24 James Tyson was flat broke, ruined, a failure...

One of the secrets of their success was what was called “slow grazing” - droving the cattle as slowly as possible through other men’s holdings, there being no fences, so they fattened on other men’s grass. Two tired young men were pushing their herd along dusty unmade roads when gold was discovered at Bendigo. James was not interested in mining, but he reasoned that wherever there were miners there would have to be meat. So he persuaded William that they should take their cattle to Bendigo. While William sold the meat and built yards
and a shop, James lived on the roads looking for stock. His method was to meet the weary herds on the last stages of their long journey from far-flung stations, offer the exhausted drovers a good price which they eagerly accepted, then after ten days or so of “slow grazing”, would arrive in Bendigo with his cattle in good condition and quite literally make a killing. By this time William had been joined by two other brothers to help with the butchery. After four years the partnership was dissolved. James’ share amounted to £200,000. It is not on record what the other Tysons did with their money, but James was dedicated to a dream, a plan for more cattle and more LAND.

He gradually bought up and acquired runs and holdings, properties and stations in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. He was no “absentee landlord”, for he visited regularly and he improved them with methods far ahead of his time, sparing no expense and effort to do it. In the sixties of last century, the great Tyson properties of Glenormiston (Boulia) and Tinnenburra (Cunnamulla) were the leaders in the harnessing of the artesian bores, life-blood of the far west. Felton (Cambooya) had the first hydraulic wool press on the Darling Downs, and on Mt. Russell the water reticulation scheme was thirty years ahead of its next rival.

**MAN OF FRUGAL HABITS**

He was a tall handsome man, 6 feet 4 inches in height, with a bushy beard, abnormally, pathologically shy, and extremely frugal in his habits. The reason for the shyness was of course a complex resulting from his mother’s history, and the frugality traced back to the struggle for existence in his early years. They were the emotional scars he carried. As you will have gathered, there was not time for formal schooling even had there been the opportunity, but the mature Tyson was a well-informed man who wrote a flowing hand and who must have been a financial wizard. All the business of his complicated affairs was done by himself, with the particulars and details kept in notebooks in his saddle bags. He travelled between his stations on horseback, and later in a buggy, with perhaps an aborigine for company.

He liked the blacks, he said. They were gentle people. “Treat them right and they treat you right”.) He would appear unexpectedly to see how things were being looked after in his absence. His chronic shyness caused him to camp out even when within sight of a township or a homestead where he would have been most welcome, and to remain anonymous, giving if approached, the name of Brown or Smith. Because he could not remember the names of people he met, he addressed everyone to whom he spoke as “Mister” - not women, of course, but then he did not speak to women at all if he could avoid it.
He seldom visited cities and then only on business, went second class, he said only because there was no third; stayed at the cheapest hotels. In those establishing years he was known to swim the river to save the shilling toll fee, carrying his matches and cheque book under his hat or in his mouth, and on arriving on the other side would light a fire to dry out. On one such occasion he then rode on his way and later in the day bought a property for £30,000, writing a cheque for the whole amount on the spot.

In later years, sitting in a group around a campfire, he was asked, "And how, sir, did you make your money?" As he spoke the man struck a match and lit his pipe. "Well", said Tyson calmly and courteously, "There's one thing I didn't do. I'll tell you that. I never used a match when a firestick would do". "Money", he often said, "Money, muscle and brains were made for use, not abuse. Money, poured down a man's throat or wasted in useless luxuries might just as well be thrown in the sea."

He boasted that he had never been in a prison or a hospital in his life, never been in a theatre or a church except to be christened, never visited a doctor or tasted medicine, never used bad language or tolerated it in others, never smoked or drank. He was not a woman-hater as some account him, it was simply that his shyness prevented him from enjoying their company. His mother he dearly loved, and she in turn loved and was proud of him. There is a charming story of her being presented to the Duke of Edinburgh, son of Queen Victoria, on his visit to the Colony in 1872. Far from being overwhelmed by the honor, she said, "Now you may go away home to your good mother and tell her that you have shook the hand of Jamie Tyson's mother".

In a rare expansive moment he confided to a friend a sad little story. Out in the bush with cattle, he found himself in strange country at night, cold hungry and lost. Seeing a light among the trees, he went to the house to ask the way. The door was opened, he said, by the finest woman he ever laid eyes on, tall clear-eyed and rosy of cheek. With kindness and concern she insisted that he come in and sit by the fire while she prepared him a meal. The sight of this charming girl bustling around the cosy room made a profound impression on him, but he was too shy to let her know and he lacked the courage to return and thank her. From time to time he asked after her, and at last was told she had married. So that was the end of his love-story and the closest he ever came to one.

**APPOINTED AN M.L.C.**

In 1883 the Queensland Government was considering a proposition from an Anglo-French combine to build a railway from Charleville to the Gulf, in return for 100,000 acres of land. Tyson was firmly of the
opinion that Queenslanders should own Queensland, so he offered the Government, through his friend the Premier Sir Thomas McIlwraith, the loan of £250,000. For various good reasons the offer was not accepted, but some years later when the Treasury was in financial straits he bought Government Bonds to the value of the same amount, a quarter of a million pounds, paying by cheque, the largest private cheque, it is said, ever drawn in Australia... He had come a long way since that first half-crown.

The Government acknowledged his generous help by appointing him in June 1893 a Member of the Legislative Council, a life appointment which entitled him to the prefix “Honourable”. He was a member of Parliament for five years, during which time he made only one speech. That was in support of the Marsupials Destruction Act and was “that kangaroo rats and bandicoots be excepted”. Unfortunately he was misreported, as happens to so many people in public life and, dismayed and offended, he retired from the rostrum and made no more speeches.

It was a day of nicknames, and he had many. “Daylight Jimmy” from his life-long habit of “early to bed, early to rise”, the “Billycan Millionaire” from his preference for tea made and served in a smoke blackened billy, “Mean Tyson” and “Hungry Tyson”, but the facts do not bear this out. He simply felt that he had more things to do with his money than spend it as other people thought he should. Hundreds

Felton Homestead near Cambooya (Q.) where Tyson died.
(Photo courtesy Mr. Murdoch Wales)
of graziers received cash loans from him often without security if he could see they were in real need and were hard working. Good causes found him most generous. A committee called on him for a donation towards the building of a church on the Darling Downs. Tyson asked the amount of the builders’ estimate and, on being told it was £400, wrote a cheque for the whole amount. A few weeks later the committee called again. It seemed the builder had forgotten to include the cost of the lightning conductor, and would Mr. Tyson care to pay for that too. “No”, said Mr. Tyson, courteous as always, “If God can’t protect his own church from his own lightning, why should I?."

By this time he had made his home at Felton near Cambooya. He was a lonely man. In a letter to Henry Daniels at Felton in 1898 shortly before he died, he said: “I am very lonely. I have never knowingly injured a man in my life and I am over seventy years of age and haven’t a friend in the world. I have any amount of relatives. All the same, when you get old, you feel you would like someone to pay you some slight regard. I get very lonely at times...” he died, as he had lived, alone, refusing to see a doctor to the last.

It was commonly accepted that Tyson had not made a will. He was quoted as saying that he did not care what happened to his money when he was dead. But the years that had brought him wealth also brought him wisdom and responsibility, and he spoke widely of leaving a large sum to establish in Toowoomba a College of Technical and Agricultural Education.

**MYSTERY OF A WILL**

Immediately the body of “The Old Gentleman” as he was called by his staff, was discovered, the manager, Buchanan, sent a message to Brisbane. The telegram was sent to Mr. Macdonald Paterson, an ex M.L.A. and a solicitor. What is more, he was James Tyson’s solicitor. So Mr. Macdonald Paterson promptly chartered a special train and came to Felton post haste. He came, he said to take possession of the will which he said he himself had drawn up during Tyson’s visit to him only days previously and which the Old Gentleman after signing it had brought home for further perusal. However, intensive search failed to find that will. If, as many suggested at the time, there was no will to find, why was the solicitor sent for. If there was no will, why that special train?

However, no will being forthcoming, James Tyson was declared intestate. Then there was the unseemly spectacle of the three States of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland squabbling in the courts over the death duties. Finally it was decided that he had regarded Felton as his home and had lived there longest, so Queensland won the argument. It seems sad that so little good came of
so much hard work and endeavour. His fortune, even in that time of depression, was valued at two-and-a-half million pounds, and was divided among his many relatives, even descendants of Margaret, the sister left behind in England, making a claim.

After his death, when Mt. Russell station was cut up for closer settlement and when the new settlers decided to build a school for their children, they called it Mount Tyson School in honour of the former owner. An attractive village has grown up around the school which, with its jacaranda-lined street, regularly wins a Tidy Towns award, and these, with the flat-topped Mount Tyson nearby, are three memorials to this extraordinary man. Up in North Queensland there is another Mount Tyson, another monument which marks the area where he tried out a sugar venture. He abandoned the project for several reasons but the years have proved his judgement sound, for Tully became a rich sugar producing district.

The body of James Tyson was given formal though temporary burial in Toowoomba Cemetery after a service in St. Luke's Church, but it was later moved to Campbelltown. There, in St. Peter's graveyard he lies in an imposing tomb he caused to be erected, with his parents and other members of his family. An inscription on one side reads: "Here lies the Hon. James Tyson, M.L.C., one of the most successful pioneers of Victoria, N.S.W. and Queensland. Born 1819 died 1898".

"Banjo" Paterson wrote an obituary poem in the fashion of the day, and it forms a fitting finish to this story of a truly remarkable Australian. Here is its opening verse:

T.Y.S.O.N.

Across the Queensland border line
The mobs of cattle go,
They travel down in sun and shine,
On dusty stage and slow.
The drivers riding slowly on
To let the cattle spread,
Will say, Here's one old landmark gone
For Old Man Tyson's dead.
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