

Outlaw: The Story of Joe Flick

Written and Researched by Greg Barron

The First Five Chapters

1. Old Doomadgee

In 1934 I applied to the School of Anthropology, Sydney University, to undertake field research for my doctoral thesis. A cousin of my father's was a member of the Waitara branch of the Christian Brethren, and through them I was invited to 'visit and assist' at Doomadgee Mission, in the Gulf of Carpentaria. While there I would compile a dictionary of the languages spoken by the Gangalidda and Waanyi people.

Being just twenty-two years old, six-feet-tall but lanky and 'short on common sense,' as my father used to say, my mother was rightly worried at my chances of reaching my destination, let alone surviving six months in the wild Gulf. Yet, with her tears still damp on my shirt, I steered my four-cylinder Riley motor car out of our depression ravaged suburb of Burwood, north to Newcastle, then onto the New England Highway with the windows wide open and the warm November air on my face.

I'd changed and repaired my first flat tyre before I was through the Hunter Valley, broke an axle in Tingha, got bogged in the black soils near Moree. I camped each night beside my car, learned to cook on a fire and make the best of what I had. These skills would stand me in good stead in the sands of North Africa, eight or nine years later, when I carried a Lee-Enfield rifle for my country, but that's another story.

This journey north was character building, to say the least. I waited three days for the repair of a front spring in Augathella and swore like a teamster when the petrol tank ran dry five miles short of Longreach. Near Winton I picked up a swagman to keep me company for a hundred miles, then discovered, a short time

after, that he had emptied my wallet of cash. Luckily I'd followed my father's advice and hidden the bulk of my funds under the dash.

Finally, I reached the outpost of Burketown, filling the trunk with provisions for the Mission, and obtaining a hand-drawn mud map of the final leg. Two days later; four weeks after my mother's final kiss, the Riley churned through the ruts over a tidal clay pan, and spun her rear wheels up the rise into the old Doomadgee Mission, west of Arthur's Creek at Bayley Point.

I looked around me with the eye of a young man eager for adventure, anxious to learn what my home over the next months would be like. The mission occupied, essentially, but not strictly, an island of green, some six miles by two or three in extent, surrounded by marshes and saltwater inlets on all sides. To the north was the ocean – of a colour unfamiliar to me – a kind of blue-green-grey. A mangrove-lined creek snaked its way past the Mission lands to the east. Most of the high ground, I saw, was lightly wooded. Soon enough I would learn to tell a carbeen tree from a messmate, but that first day they were just trees, and a scrubby type they were too.

The Mission itself, when we reached it, occupied a sandy ridge overlooking more swamps. It was neat, but more primitive than I had expected. All the buildings – a couple of outhouses, and two dormitories, presumably one for boys and one for girls – were made of pandanus-palm logs standing on end, with corrugated tin or speargrass thatch roofs. I noted horse yards, a vegetable garden fenced with wire netting, and the beginnings of an orchard. A woman was carrying a bucket of water up from the well on the edge of the marshes, some of which apparently held freshwater.

The Missionaries, Len and Dorothy Akehurst, along with their young son, Frank, met me at the car, hustled me inside their home and had me drinking tea in no time.

Len was taller than me, and thin as a whip, but with big hands and a wiry knottiness to his muscles. His corded neck was the exact same width as his face.

His wife Dorothy looked small beside him, with kind eyes and dark curls. They were, all in all, serious but friendly souls, and related to me how they had first tried their luck at building a mission in Burketown itself, but were forced out here, to this genuine wilderness, by the attitude and lifestyles of the local white population.

The Akehursts gave me a private room in one of the outbuildings, with a kapok mattress and bed-base cleverly made of timber branches. The floor was of crushed termite mound, almost as hard as concrete. Most of the furniture, it turned out, had been made by or under the supervision of an old white man called Bob Gates, a carpenter from Tasmania. He lived in another room in the same dwelling as I, and proved to be a good company.

In those first days, let me tell you, I set about my task with energy. I had an indexed notebook for words and their meanings, one for grammar rules and one for phrases. Len and Dorothy provided my first few Waanyi and Ganglidda words, for they had been doing their best to learn the local tongues when they could. They let me loose on the mission children, who had mostly been brought from Burketown, and who further enlightened me to the secrets of their dialects, making me smile in the process. Meanwhile, the good missionaries dosed me up on quinine to keep the Gulf Fever at bay, and I did not have to raise a hand to feed myself, apart from sometimes indulging in the pleasurable sport of fishing.

In my free time, I was drawn to the country itself. I took rambling walks to the beach, venturing carelessly at times into the sucking mud of the mangroves. I sketched Pains and Bayley Islands, mangrove swamps and stands of pandanus trees. I saw brolgas dance, morning glory clouds, and one day I watched Nichol, one of the Gangalidda workers, whistle up an emu, bewitching it into coming close, at which point he rose and clubbed it to death for the pot.

I met all the pivotal characters in the local scene: Bob Gates and his offsider, Frank: the aforementioned Nichol, young Stanley and his brother Willie. Lizzie and

her daughter, Dulcie. There was also Mahomet Hussein, who lived along the coast a little, but idled away much of his time at the mission.

Growing in confidence, and seeking older, more accomplished speakers of the local tongues, I also ventured into the camp of itinerants on the eastern side of the 'island,' along the banks of Doomadgee Creek, the western arm of Arthur's Creek. I found that if I took a little tobacco with me, the inhabitants were much more interested in conversation.

I met an old man called Charlie, who knew hardly a word of English but loved to go to the missionaries' Saturday night prayer meetings, dressed only in a loincloth. I also made the acquaintance of a famous dugong hunter called Old Jack, who still hunted the aquatic beasts with a spear and sixteen-foot dugout canoe. Others sat around smoky fires, with scores of whippet-thin dogs in attendance, these half-starved canines chewing on fish bones and tortoise shells; anything that resembled food.

One particular old woman interested me from the start, for several reasons. One was her age, she looked to be at least eighty years, and her eyes were pale with the effects of sandy blight. The other reason was that the others spoke to her little and she kept her own fire. Her 'white' name, I learned, was Kitty. Her deep, dusty skin was pitted by a multitude of old scars, most notably on her forehead. She sat in the shade through much of the day, usually in her own camp, but sometimes alongside the creek near the jetty, or occasionally venturing up near to the mission buildings.

When I queried Len Akehurst about her, he told me that Kitty was not from this country like the others, her birthplace being outback New South Wales. Learning that she was a fellow New South Welshman piqued my interest still further.

Then came the bombshell. Kitty, Len told me, had been the wife of a white cattleman for more than thirty years, and her long-dead son was an infamous outlaw.

Outlaw? My ears pricked like those of a rabbit. Being young, and a romantic at heart, I was fascinated by feats of arms and drawn by nature of my profession to the science of crime.

The next few afternoons I spent sitting in the shade with Kitty. The first thing that I noticed was that she spoke English better than most of the others in that camp, perhaps because of her years in company with a white man. A clay pipe, scorched around the bowl, sat between her lips or in her hand most of the time, sometimes lit, sometimes not.

Occasionally, tiring of my questions, she would stand up and move. At other times she would accept gifts of tea or tobacco, and let me sit for hours, feigning deafness when I probed too deep.

Day by day, however, I suspected that she was growing to like me. I learned that she preferred Capstan tobacco to Barrett's, and despite her near-blindness she could tell the difference straight off. Her bad vision, it seemed, bothered her little. She could do anything a comparable woman of her age could do, including cook, fish, and walk reasonably long distances. She had a wicked sense of humour, and one day, when we lounged and talked down at the creek, she sitting against a tree, and myself with my back to the water, she kept chuckling to herself.

'What's so funny?' I asked.

Kitty pointed out into the racing ebb tide and said, 'Big-feller 'gator many time poke him head up an' look at you. Might be he wanna eat you up.'

That afternoon, as if to reward me for amusing her, she told me a little about her husband, whose name was Henry, or Harry to his mates. Unlike most white stockmen and their women, Kitty proudly told me that she and Henry were 'proper way married.' From a pocket in her dress she produced a grimy pewter ring of the cheapest kind.

Henry's family were German immigrants, she told me, his father Casper Flecke having been a vine dresser. If I was surprised that Kitty knew the term, I was even more surprised that she could tell me exactly what work vine dressers

did, conjuring imaginary vines and the dresser's scateurs with her hands. It was not the first time she would surprise me. I was to find that her memory for places – people, conversations; things that people had told her – was as sharp as a Kodak print.

She went on to relate how the Flecke family's passage to Australia was paid for by the famous Macarthur family of Sydney, so Casper could work on their vineyards at Camden. After the five-year contract expired the family drifted north to Maitland, where Casper became a spirit merchant, and young Henry fell into bush work on outlying stations, drifting further afield as he grew older.

Henry had been working on Mungyer Station, near Moree, when he took Kitty from a camp along the Mehi River.

'He took you?' I asked.

Kitty agreed that yes, he had found her alone, ridden her down and taken her on his horse. Of course she had been terrified. He taught her to ride, wear stockman's clothes and tend cattle. Kitty, in dungarees and shirt, worked beside her man by day, and shared his swag at night.

'From now on,' he said, 'your name is Kitty.'

Three times she repeated her real name.

'Forget that one. Kitty's your name now.'

When Kitty became pregnant she continued to ride beside Henry and work with cattle. Their son, Joe, was born in a stock camp on Mungyer Station. Henry was enamoured of the child, and pronounced him the best-formed little fellow he had seen.

Our talks were interrupted when the first days of heavy rain came. I now learned why the Mission lands were so often described as an island, for the encircling arms of water joined hands and cut us off. The humidity grew to unbearable levels, so that I sweltered day and night, and Mrs Akehurst was struck down with Gulf Fever.

Then, when the sun was shining again, producing an intensity of damp heat I could scarcely bear, I walked into Kitty's camp with a lump of damper and some tea. That day Kitty started to tell me about Joe. Later I was able to add to her story some details that I researched and learned first-hand from court records, and the like, for Kitty cared little for dates and time.

In the main, however, what follows is the story she told. I learned, in the coming days, that for people who do not write, recollections and stories travel from lip to lip with perfect accuracy. And for them, truth can be a matter of life and death. Those parts of Joe's life Kitty had not seen with her own eyes, she had learned from others, and related word-for-word.

Quite early in our talks, she told me that the police shot Joe fourteen times before he fell dead, and I began to understand that few people carried such a burden of pain as that old woman. From that time on, neither heat nor monsoonal downpours could stop my time with Kitty.

Before long, sweating in my bed, under a net besieged by centipedes and mosquitoes, I was dreaming of Kitty's outlaw son. Dreaming of the way it might have been near the end, with bullet wounds oozing blood from his gut, thigh, chest and limbs, and his lean face like a death's-head in the dusk, and God only knew what police skulking nearby.

I came to understand that Joe Flick, the grandson of a German vine dresser and a Kamilaroi warrior, was the truest wild colonial boy of them all. I hungered for his story like a starving man.

2. The Brook Hotel

At the Mission; that island in the clay and salt of the wild Gulf shore, came days of building heat, followed by thunderstorms such as I had never dreamed possible. Raking winds and black thunderheads roving ahead of a packed, boiling cloud mass, spitting lightning over a shallow sea churned to a furious white.

Years later I would see ranks of German soldiers and their Panzer IV tanks through the blowing sands of El Alamein and feel that same sense of awe and powerlessness. I was learning something that my city upbringing had not taught me; that there are powers in the world far greater than our pitiful selves.

I took to visiting with Kitty in the late mornings, while the Mission children were still at their lessons. So enamoured of the story was I, that in those days I scarcely touched ink to my notebooks. Len Akehurst lectured me mildly for neglecting my work, but I felt myself bound up with Kitty's story, and could not let go.



When Joe was still an infant, Kitty told me, Henry Flick moved the small family up into Queensland, where he found a job working sheep on Murweh Station. He kept Kitty and their son in a wurlie made of bark and scraps of tin on the waterhole near the homestead, coming home after days out on the run smelling of wool, dust and rum. He was a hard man, with steely blue eyes, and knife-scars on his hand and left thumb, but he loved his little boy.

One morning Henry rode back from a weekend of drinking and gambling in Charleville, and took from his pocket a ring he'd won at cards. He slid it onto Kitty's finger.

'There you go. Now we're prop'ly married,' he said.

This gesture didn't dampen Henry's interest in other women, for around this time at Murweh he became enamoured of a Kunja girl named Lizzie, who worked as a maid at the homestead. He studied her movements – noticing that round ten pm, when she finished her work, Lizzie usually walked alone out back to the servant's huts. Henry laid his plans with care.

The following night, with Kitty and Joe packed up and waiting. Henry rode up to the homestead, hid behind a bush with a spare horse, and waited for the girl to come. He clamped a hand over her mouth and carried her to his horse. With a good moon, he, Kitty, little Joe and Lizzie were soon on their way to the Bulloo River.

Jenkins, the station owner, was furious at the loss, and he, his eldest son and a tracker set off in pursuit of their missing housemaid. Henry, however, was expecting them. Fifty miles down the track, he sent Kitty, Joe, and Lizzie on ahead, and waited behind a convenient outcrop.

When the riders came up, Henry appeared with a double-barrelled rifle in his hands, and a hatchet in his belt. 'Go home you bastards,' he said, addressing Jenkins and his son. 'I've got one bullet for each of you, and an axe for whatever's left.'

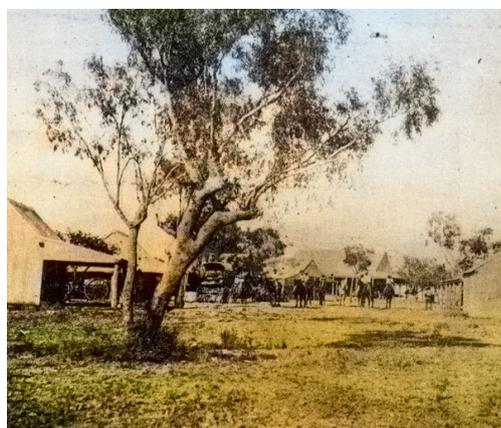
Jenkins and his son spat and swore, but turned their mounts for home. That, however, wasn't the end of the matter.

The police were soon in pursuit, and Joe was four years old when he watched uniformed men knock his father from his horse with a rifle butt, then force him to kneel and wear chains. In that state they dragged Henry Flick, with his family following miserably behind, to Charleville, where he was charged with aggravated assault and sentenced to six months in Roma gaol. Lizzie was returned to the Jenkins family.

Kitty was not judged to be a fit carer for her son without Henry, so the little boy stayed with a succession of police families, while his mother made camp by the river and waited, pining for her boy, starving herself until her legs were like sticks and the townspeople fed her out of pity.

Despite publicly swearing that he would 'scalp' the entire Jenkins family for calling the traps on him, Henry left the district as soon as he was released. Feeling increasingly like outcasts, the little family rode north on 'borrowed' horses for the Gulf, where a score of new stations needed good stockmen – and Henry was handy with horses, sheep and cattle – resilient and self-reliant.

Packhorses carried everything they owned to Lawn Hill station. There, for the first time they saw the homestead and creek where much later Joe would make his last bloody stand, but it was the picturesque pandanus and paperbark lined waterway, with its dramatic ochre-hued cliffs, that caught their eyes at the time. It seemed, back then, like a land of promise.



Frank Hann, the owner, hired Henry on the spot, and offered them a place to camp nearby. 'Play straight with me,' he said, 'and we'll get on famously.'

Within a year or two Joe was riding his own horse, and could crack a stockwhip like a man. By eight years of age he could shoot a small-bore rifle, drop a running wallaby at a hundred yards, and dress it for the pot in a blink.

Like many stockmen, Henry Flick kept an eye out for precious metals. One day, out on the run, he camped on a small hill with a vein of quartz. The chunks he extracted were filled with a dark metal. He knew enough to test it by heating some fragments and dropping them into water. When a greasy sludge rose to the surface, he knew it was silver. He rode to Cloncurry to lodge a series of claims with the Mining Warden.

With Henry now officially a miner, life changed. The days of travelling were over, and the new camp near the mine became a home. Father and son built a couple of stout huts, and the small family put down roots. It was a busy, friendly camp, with a couple of labourers, raised from the local Waanyi, thrown in. Henry brought other women into his bed, when they took his fancy, but Kitty was too intent on the survival of herself and her son to indulge in jealousy. Most days, when the other chores were done, she sat in the shade and plaited cabbage-tree hats to sell to stockmen and travellers.

By the age of thirteen, Joe had roamed every inch of the surrounding wilderness, learning everything he could from the Waanyi men. Before long he was supplementing the family income with stock work on Lawn Hill and other nearby stations such as Punjaub and Westmoreland. The family lived on bush food, bronzed barramundi and catfish from the creeks, and the occasional 'lost' bullock.

Joe could whistle so beautifully it would make you cry, and stun a goanna at fifty yards with a stone. He had a smile that won over men and women alike. He grew to manhood in this way, close to both his parents, and as fine a bushman as any man alive. He was part horse, part bush spirit, Henry used to say. Neither

tobacco nor drink tempted him, and he did a man's work well in every role he cared to fill, always with a flashing smile and good grace.

This was the first time, since I'd arrived at Doomadgee Mission, that I saw Kitty truly smile. It was like she'd forgotten I was there. Her white eyes looked skyward, and her toothless lips cracked open.

'Sounds like your son was something special,' I said.

Kitty closed her eyes and nodded thoughtfully.

Her boy was twenty-one years old, when the day came that changed it all.

'Hey Joey, we got no sugar,' Henry growled one morning, head and shoulders into the tucker-box that held their supplies.

'No dad.'

'Not much tea neither.'

'Scarcely a week, I reckon,' said Joe.

Harry Flick turned a whiskey bottle upside down and nary a drop appeared.

'Looks like a trip to Burketown, son. Take your mama with you to tail the horses.'

Joe strapped his revolver belt on, and whistled up the packs. They were on the road before the sun had peered over the red stone ridges around the mine.

And didn't mother and son love to ride together? Laughing, speaking a mix of English, Kriol, and her native tongue from down south. They crossed to the Gregory River along a dry scrub of bloodwood and termite mounds, that had come to be known as Kitty's Plains.

The Gregory was still full from the Wet, the pandanus roots submerged, and the water retreating, leaving green couch grass patches on the banks. Striped archer fish patrolled the shallows, and rainbow bee-eaters flicked low over the surface.

Kitty and Joe saw the first dragonflies, that day, and knew that the season's change was coming.

Later in the day, riding along the high western bank of the river, Kitty spotted a tell-tale hole up high in a woollybutt tree, and tiny stingless bees emerging. She climbed the trunk like a possum, shimmying up with a hatchet and wrapping chunks of sweet sugar-bag honey in paperbark. They ate honey and dried meat by the fire that night, then amused each other by mimicking the creatures of the bush, and Kitty told stories from her inexhaustible supply.

Just before they reached the small settlement at Beame's Brook, Joe's gelding, newly broken as he was, was squeezed against a tree by Kitty's mount and he lashed out with his back legs. His aim was bad, and his near hoof struck the woman's shin. Within an hour the limb was swollen red, blue and painful. It seemed better that she would wait and rest the injury while Joe went on to Burketown.

Joe made a camp for his mother along the creek where she could sit and fish, then went to the hotel – a well-built affair of split logs and weatherboard. Jim Cashman, the owner, was behind the bar. His young wife Mary, sat on a chair at the nearest table, an infant girl on her legs below her belly, already well-rounded with the next arrival.

'Well if it isn't Yella Joe,' Cashman said. He was originally from Sydney, but had made his name and modest fortune looking out for the main chance in North Queensland. A well-known businessman on the Palmer Fields, he had moved on after the death of his first wife, Margaret, in Cooktown. 'Where's your old man?'

'Back home, Mister Cashman. I've left Mama down the creek with a crook leg, I didn't want to take her down the black's camp while I go into Burketown. Will you keep an eye on her?'

'Course I will, Joey. She'll be safe here.'

While Joe pushed on with the packs, Kitty sat, fished with grasshoppers and flies for bait, and waited. The next day a man from the camp came down to the river to water his horse. He was heavy in the gut, and his teeth rotten from too much sugar. Kitty recognised him as a slave-boy belonging to Jim Cashman.

The intruder stared at Kitty, but said nothing.

The next day he came back again. She hid when she heard him coming, but he found her, knocked her down, examined her face up close, then looped a noose around her neck and took her to his camp.

On the way they passed the pub, and Cashman himself was standing out the front.

‘Hey, boy, you know that’s Harry Flick’s woman?’

‘She’s mine now, boss.’

‘I don’t recommend crossing Flick, but that’s your look out.’

At the camp Kitty’s new ‘husband’ told her to cook him up some tucker and she had no choice but to obey. Later on, when the meal was finished, he raped her.

Meanwhile Joe hurried the thirty miles to Burketown, with the very different scents of the tidal Albert River in his nostrils. Only a few dozen whites lived permanently in the town, though seamen from regular shipping traffic, and passing droving teams, helped support the two pubs.

Most of the inhabitants treated Joey with tolerant politeness. They called him Yella Joe, but took him seriously. After all, he dressed like a white man, talked like one, and could out-ride and out-shoot most of them.



Burketown had two stores, one owned by Watson Bros, and another much larger owned by Philp, Burns and Company, managed by Mister Amsden. The competition between the two was such that discounts could be had, particularly for a man with slugs of crudely refined silver to trade.

Joe worked through his list, and finally, with pack-saddles bulging, he rode back to the Brook in high spirits, but was stunned to find his mother's camp abandoned, still with some of her things there.

Guessing what might have happened, he picked up her belongings, then rode through the riverside camps until he found Kitty at the fire of Cashman's slave-boy, her captor sitting at the entrance of his wurlie, grinning like a king and fingering a long knife.

When Joe pulled up his horse, dismounted, and met his mother's eye, something like a Gulf-country storm grew inside him. And as Kitty described that moment I could feel every heartbeat, even then, forty-five years afterwards.

3. The 'Shooting' of Cashman

Cashman's boy saw Joe coming, and rose to his full height, brandishing the knife. 'You been lookout for trouble with me?' he asked.

Yet he hadn't reckoned on the way Joe covered the ground between them, scarcely having time to raise his guard before copping a right-cross flush to his jaw. Joe was not a big man – five feet eight or nine – but his hands were over-sized, hard from work, and he was lightning quick.

Henry had taught Joe the basics. The rest he'd worked out for himself. The other man's knife swung on empty space, then fell to the ground from an arm numbed to the shoulder. Joe fought with instinctive grace, whip-like speed and savage power.

The one-sided fight attracted a crowd, and in the end three men were needed to drag Joe from his victim, now a pitiful sight, holding a broken jaw and wailing, his face slick with blood. One of his trouser cuffs was smoking, and his foot was blistered, from a backwards step into the fire.

'Let me go,' shouted Joe, and he stood, chest heaving, while the crowd surged back out of reach. 'That man deserved a beating, and none of you can deny it.'

When he had calmed down, Joe helped his mother to a horse, hating the shame on her face. Shame that was not her fault. Shame that had been foisted on her by an act of violent lust.

They rode in silence, heading back to Kitty's camp for her things. Then, Joe's anger still undampened, he bathed his face in the river, dabbing the cool liquid where a few despairing blows had landed. Then, watching the insects swirling in the sunlight around the pandanus, tears pricked his eyes at the thought of what had happened.

'I shouldn't have left you,' he said.

'It's not your fault,' said Kitty. 'It was him – a bad man – who took me, and Cashman saw him drag me along his camp. He could have stopped it.'

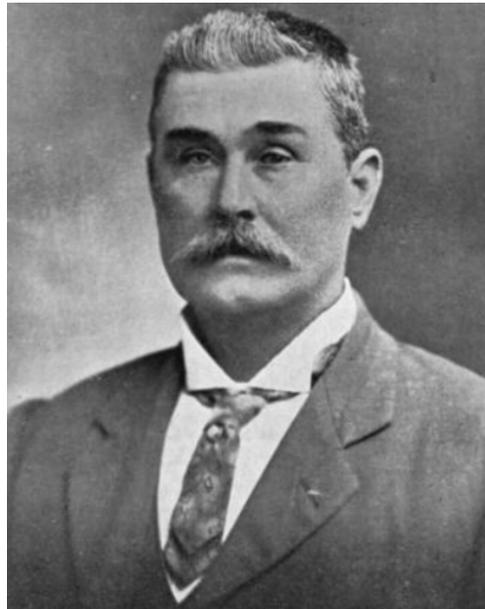
'Cashman saw him take you?'

Kitty nodded fearfully.

Joe saw her mounted again, and sent her home, with the pack horses on a string. 'Go ahead now,' he told her. 'I'll follow along directly.'

'Don't do anything you can't take back,' she warned.

Once Kitty had gone, Joe climbed onto his own saddle, and urged his gelding up to the pub. Riding up to the front verandah, he saw Jim Cashman, red faced and furious, standing in the doorway.



Jim Cashman

'How dare you lay a hand on my boy,' Cashman shouted. 'You've broken his jaw. I'll see you arrested, Yella Joe.'

But Joe's temper was flickering and rumbling, building power and menace. 'You let him take my Mama, you saw him do it. She told me.'

'I don't interfere with your lot,' retorted the pub owner. 'There's no profit in doing so, and you know it. Now make yourself scarce or I'll have you charged with assault, you damned half-breed.'

Joe was about to spur his horse and follow his mother, but this last insult broke something inside him. Without stopping to think he did something that changed his life. Shortened his life. Made him a wanted man.

Taking out his revolver, and waving it with a flourish, he fired a shot into the wall just above the door where Cashman was standing. For a boy such as Joe to fire on a white man was bad enough, but Mary Cashman, without Joe's knowledge, had walked up behind her husband and copped a face full of wood splinters and dust, causing her to cry out and fall.

Joe saw the woman go down. Believing that he had accidentally shot her, he applied his spurs to the gelding and galloped away in a panic. He had never come up against the law in his life, and apart from a few 'dodged' cattle he had not given them reason. That fact, he now knew, had changed.

Kitty reined in some five miles up the track, watching anxiously for Joe. Her bruised off-side leg had mostly healed, but riding was causing her some pain, so resting while she waited seemed like the best course of action.

Before long, she heard urgent hoofbeats. Her relief at seeing Joe changed to alarm as she saw the troubled expression on his face.

'I've maybe shot Mrs Cashman. I don't know,' he said, reining in beside her.

Kitty's first reaction was a pitiful wail. Finally she managed, 'How?'

'I fired a shot. I just wanted to warn Cashman. I didn't know that she was standing behind him.'

Neither of them could think of any plan better than to keep heading for home, though Kitty wept a little as they rode. Both were skilled riders, and their pace was limited only by the packs. Continuing long into the night, Kitty ignoring the nuisance pain in her leg, they stopped only to water the horses, finally reaching their camp around midnight.

Henry came out from the hut to meet them. 'Strange time to be getting home,' he said. 'What's happened?'

Joe dismounted, and while they unloaded the supplies, he told his father everything. 'I lost my temper,' he explained.

Henry covered his face with his hands. His reaction seemed to emphasise the gravity of the situation. 'You were right to punish the man who hurt your mother, and you saved me the trouble of wreaking havoc on him myself.'

'But I might have shot Missus Cashman.'

'Pah,' said Henry. 'One thing I know about you, Joey, is that you hit what you aim at. Besides, that damn Mary Kearney, she was nothing but a housemaid until she got her hooks into Jim, and every man-jack knows that she's a one-woman melodrama into the bargain.' Henry packed and lit his pipe, deep in thought. 'If you run, Joey, they'll hunt you down,' he said. 'You have to ride into Burketown and give yourself up.'

Kitty was shaking her head from side to side, keening softly. 'No, no, no.'

'It's the best thing to do,' Henry insisted. 'My guess is that Mary won't be hurt too bad, and Joey will get only a light sentence.'

None of them slept that night, but sat around the fire, watching the deep orange coals spit and spark, talking of horses and the bush, and the constellations of stars that sprawled across the heavens above the red earth and rock that surrounded them.

In those hours of waiting Joe thought deeply about what had happened at Beames Brook. After more than twenty years of living with Henry Flick, the cheap ring on Kitty's finger did not fool anybody. She was not Henry's wife. To the world out there she was just Henry's gin. She was property, and property could be stolen and used. Likewise, Henry felt free to take other women when he felt the urge, sometimes living with them for months on end before he tired of them.

Joe was glad, then, that he had stood up for his mother, whatever the consequences, and vowed that he would go on doing so. The system, he realised, was weighted against those caught in the twilight of one world and the dawn of another.

In the first flush of dawn, Joe said goodbye to his father, then put his arm around his mother's shoulders, kissed her tearful cheeks, then saddled and bridled a fresh horse. He was about to ride off, when Henry walked up and plucked Joe's revolver from its holster.

'No guns, son. For all our sakes, just give yourself up and take what they dish out.'

Joe agreed, but he hated riding off into a now-hostile land without a weapon.

The German vine-dresser's son was far from perfect, but he loved his boy.

After stewing through the early part of the morning, Henry told Kitty to stay at home, saddled his horse and set off for the Brook. Riding hard, he reached the pub just after dark, with the interior lit by slush lanterns, and the drinking just warming up – ringers, prospectors and travellers gripping their frothy glasses – and an Irishman's fiddle caterwauling in a corner.

Ignoring the crowd, Henry walked unarmed but still dangerously into the bar. He was no longer young, but stood almost six feet tall, his arms and shoulders bunched with muscle from long days swinging a hammer or pick at the mine.

Not only was Jim Cashman present, but his wife Mary as well, large as life and seemingly unhurt. She ducked out as soon as she recognised the visitor, but Cashman himself stood his ground, even when Henry walked up as close as the slab bar allowed him to.

'Where's my son?' Henry demanded.

Cashman's right hand delved under the bar, and Henry guessed that he had a weapon there ready. 'On his way to Burketown with Constable Hasenkamp and his trackers. Joe tried to kill me, you know.'

'Like hell he did,' Henry snarled. 'If Joe wanted to kill you you'd be dead. Now tell me, what have they charged him with?'

'I don't know.'

'You do know, for you made the complaint. Tell me.'

Cashman licked his lips, his eyes now furtive. Slowly he raised his hand until the barrel, cylinder and cocked hammer of a Smith and Wesson Model 3 appeared over the bar. 'Get out of here or I'll be within my rights to shoot you dead.'

Henry was not afraid. He slapped the revolver from Cashman's hand, and it clattered to the floor. The fiddle stopped scraping and all conversation ceased. Every eye in that bar was on the confrontation now.

'Tell me, you bastard,' shouted Henry. 'What crime have they charged my boy with?'

'Attempted murder,' said Cashman. 'They've charged the yella bastard with attempted murder.'

Henry's hand stiffened, and his heart seemed to stop beating. He walked outside, where the horses were lined up, tethered to hitching posts, and the drinkers' 'boys' sat talking around small fires nearby.

Henry looked up at the darkened sky, still touched with the last pink shades of sunset.

'Oh God what have I done,' he croaked out. 'I should have let my Joey run.'

4. Hasenkamp

Work at the Doomadgee Mission continued, despite rain and humid heat. Through it all, Len Akehurst toiled from before dawn to long after dusk, assisting with building works, teaching lessons, carrying water, performing the occasional baptism and preaching at prayer meetings. He had, during his training, completed a course in basic dentistry, and ringers from nearby stations would sometimes ride in to get a tooth removed, or an abscess drained.

Meanwhile I found that if I applied myself to my thesis work for an hour or two each morning, my grasp on the local languages grew apace. I became quite fond of Dorothy, and I know she understood my interest in the story of Joe Flick. We both felt in our souls the sadness that underpinned the tale. A friend from Brisbane sent her an old newspaper clipping about Joe from one of the city papers – sensationalist nonsense, it seemed to me – and this she presented to me, as an addendum to my notes on Kitty's retelling.

Meanwhile, amidst the occasional berthing of the supply boat *Noosa* down in the river, the shenanigans and politics of the camp, and the never-failing delight I took in the chattering, friendly joyfulness of the mission children, my meetings with Kitty continued.

I learned to wait while she rolled tobacco between her palms, stuffed the bowl of her pipe full and lit it with an ember from the fire. Seeing how badly some parts of Joe's story affected her, this ritual allowed her time to collect herself.

‘By and by I’ll tell you about that Constable Hasenkamp,’ she said to me.
‘That policeman who took Joey in.’

‘If you want to,’ I said.

Kitty took a deep draw on her pipe, watched the stream of smoke she exhaled critically, and began.



Hasenkamp during his internment in WW1

Mounted Constable Harry Hasenkamp was square-jawed, five feet ten in height, broad shouldered and handsome in his blue serge jacket, and as hard as granite. Like Joe Flick, he was the son of a German immigrant, his father Adolphus then being the pound-keeper down south in Ipswich.

Harry Hasenkamp was good mates with Jim Cashman. Their children played together when the publican was in Burketown, and they drank beer shoulder to shoulder at Missus Synott’s Commercial Hotel. Both men were shocked that Joe would have had the gall to shoot at a white businessman, no matter what the reason.

Now, riding with two trackers up the Gregory on their way to Henry Flick’s claim, with the purpose of arresting Joe, Hasenkamp took no chances. He prided himself on never shirking from his duty, but nor did he take unnecessary risks. With his wife, Mary Jane, four daughters and a son back in Burketown, he had no desire to be carried home in a wagon tray.

When the lead tracker spotted Joe heading towards them, along that narrow river track, Hasenkamp ordered his men to dismount, take cover in the scrub, and train their Martini-Henry carbines on the lone figure as he walked his horse towards them.

‘Stop there, Joe Flick,’ called Hasenkamp as soon as Joe was within earshot. ‘Dismount and kneel.’

Joe had seen men shot for running, so he did as he was told, getting down on one knee with his arms in the air, still holding the reins in his right hand. The police surrounded him, forefingers resting on their triggers. One took the reins, another lifted him by the shoulders and patted him down, taking his knife and a couple of cartridges for the revolver he no longer carried, rattling around in the pockets of his dungarees.

‘Where are you off to, Joe?’ asked Hasenkamp.

‘I’m riding in to give myself up.’

‘Smart boy, at least that saves us the trouble of looking for you.’

‘Did I kill Mrs Cashman?’

‘No, you did not. Though you tried hard enough to kill her husband. You shot nothing but a wall, yet if your aim was better you’d be swinging from a rope inside a week. As it is you’ll spend a good deal of your youth learning better manners.’

Joe said nothing. He instinctively understood something about men in authority. That they were friendly as long as he was a good and respectful ‘boy,’ and played the part they expected him to play. Now that he had turned on one of them, the reaction was swift.

Hasenkamp secured Joe with a neck-chain, fastening it with a Yale lock. The cold iron sat hard against his young skin, but the humiliation sat harder still. This treatment didn’t seem fair. After all, apart from the man who raped his mother, and was rightly deserving of a beating, Joe had hurt no one.

The following day, at Burketown Police Station, after a sleepless night camped in irons, and many hard miles on horseback, Joe was formally charged. Hasenkamp wrote words on a page that made him legally responsible for the ‘Attempted Murder of Patrick James Cashman.’

Joe could not read, but saw the ink-lines that made up those words winding like snake-trails across the charge-sheet and they chilled him to the bone.

The lock-up was a fortified hut just behind the station, and Joe was too miserable to do anything but sit on the wooden bench inside. He was the only occupant, with the sounds of drunken laughter from the pubs, the occasional cries of curlew and owls, and chattering geckoes for company.

The next morning Constable Hasenkamp, with freshly-shined Napoleon boots and pressed cord breeches, walked Joe to the court house, gripping his arm like a big-game hunter with his kill, for the benefit of the crowd of local business types and loafers who gathered to see Joe face court.

Inside, the magistrate occupied the bench in self-important silence, in his dark suit and bow tie. His name was Alick Clarence Lawson, just thirty years of age. His wife Olympia sat in the third row, looking admiringly up at her husband, while the buttons of her bodice strained against her generous proportions.

Alick and Olympia had been married the previous December, in the midst of an Albert River flood, and the wedding party were forced to trudge through a foot of mud and water to attend the ceremony. Reports of the best man, diminutive Lawn Hill Station owner Frank Hann, lifting the eighteen-stone Olympia down from her palanquin outside the National Bank were now local legend.

Yet, in spite of the local fun-poking at his wife and nuptials, Police Magistrate Lawson was a young man who took himself and his job very seriously. He peered down at Joe from a seeming lofty height, his bowler hat sitting beside him on the bench.

In near silence Lawson considered the evidence as it was presented: written testaments from witnesses, a scrap of weatherboard complete with embedded slug,

formerly a panel from the Beames Brook Hotel, and a matching revolver cartridge from Joe's pockets

Jim Cashman swept in, wearing a morning coat, knee-high riding boots and carrying a safari hat in one hand. He shook hands with Harry Hasenkamp, swore on the Bible to tell the truth and nothing but the truth so help him God and stepped solidly up to the stand, affecting the air of a man torn from the important work of his day.

Glossing over the incident with his 'employee' and Joe Flick's mother, Cashman spun a tale of Joe riding up to the pub, armed and raving, taking deliberate aim and 'missing' due only to the Grace of the Almighty. No one there doubted that Cashman was an eloquent and capable witness.

When Joe was asked to present his side of the story his mouth clamped up, and he could not speak, cowed into silence by confusion, fear, and this terrible turn his life had taken. Various members of the court, including Hasenkamp, the clerk, and then the Magistrate himself attempted to cajole and gentle Joe into speaking, but he remained silent, shoulders hunched, and shaking visibly.

'Struck dumb by guilt,' called a heckler from the audience.

In blessed relief, they let Joe sit again, while Police Magistrate Lawson scribbled notes and re-read statements. Finally, he looked up, 'Will the prisoner now stand.'

Joe came to his feet, shaking in every muscle and limb, cowed by this first experience of English justice. He saw no pity on Alick Lawson's face, just self-belief in his role in delivering the law, a cog in the wheels of justice that stretched all the way to Queen Victoria herself.

'Joe Flick,' Lawson said. 'I have examined the evidence, and find that there is sufficient cause to believe that you did, most feloniously, attempt to murder Mister Patrick James Cashman. I commit you for trial on the twenty-second day of March 1888, at the Supreme Court, Normanton. Bail is refused.'

There was a smattering of applause from the audience, and a muted but heartfelt wail of anguish from one woman, right at the back of the room, for Kitty herself, with Henry beside her, had come to see her son face court.

From his place near the front of the court, Harry Hasenkamp smiled.

And while the rain pattered down on the canvas tarpaulin I'd roped to four trees at Kitty's camp, to improve her living conditions somewhat, and so we could talk without getting wet, I marvelled at how fast lives can change. At how one thoughtless act can send a soul hurtling down the wrong path.

'We went along there that day in the Burketown courthouse, you know,' Kitty told me. 'Me an' Henry up the back. By an' by they bring Joey along outside. He couldn't look at my eyes, poor boy. What a thing for a woman to see the babe she suckled, there in chains, and all because he fought for her, because he loved his Mama and fought for her.'

'It broke your heart?' I said.

'Yeah, my heart broke,' Kitty agreed. Her eyes became as weathered and old as the country she walked on. I saw something inside – a relic of the cycles of life, of mother and child, all down through the generations.

Kitty took up her pipe, and would not speak another word to me that day.

5. Escape



Hasenkamp and his men shackled Joe with iron chains, and escorted him 130 miles to Normanton, a three-day ordeal on horseback. By the time they saw the town's neatly surveyed streets, laid out on the western bank of the Norman River, Joe had calluses on his neck and wrists, and his spirits were so low that he could scarcely stomach the johnny-cakes and tea that he was given on the track.

This was Kurtijar country; the people of the river plains. Joe saw them – men, women and children – watching from the camps on the fringes of town as he rode in with his neck chain firmly and humiliatingly in place.

The Normanton lock-up was located behind the Police Quarters in Borck Street, and was more substantial than Burketown's. It had an exercise yard, and four cells in a line. The judicial complex was built up on stumps, and all solidly made of heavy timber slabs secured with iron spikes. The windows were too small for a goanna to shimmy through, and the iron door would have resisted a bull. The prison compound, in its entirety, was enclosed by walls of iron sheet, ten feet high.

Joe shared his cell with two other men. One was on remand for assaulting his wife. The other, a young Irishman, was serving thirty days for riding a horse without permission, and swearing at a policeman.

‘They’ve charged ye fer the ‘tempted murder of a white man?’ the horse ‘borrower’ asked.

Joe nodded miserably.

‘T’ey’ll give ye ten t’ fifteen year fer that. No question.’

‘Ten to fifteen years in here?’ asked Joe, gesturing at the bare cell.

‘Not here,’ piped up the wife-beater. ‘They’ll take you to a proper gaol, with stone walls. Rockhampton probably, or p’raps Brisbane.’

Those four walls crushed in on Joe, and his world reeled. The thought of being taken away, far from here, to a stone prison, seemed to him much worse than death. A despondent sense of doom settled heavily on him, and he huddled into a corner like a spiny anteater, digging into the earth with sharp points all around, where nothing could dislodge him, nothing could hurt him.

Joe stayed like that until late in the afternoon, when he had a visitor – the owner from Lawn Hill Station, Frank Hann, a family friend if there was such a thing for the Flicks.



Frank Hann

Born in Dorsetshire, England, and immigrating while still a child, Frank Hann’s feats of exploration and endurance were well known and celebrated

amongst his peers. Yet, he was not big or robust as might be expected of a man with his reputation. Rather, he was more bird than bull, with red bushy eyebrows and flaming hair. He lived somewhat openly with Opal, a young Wambaya woman he had obtained from Cresswell Creek in the Territory, although his white friends pretended that she was his housemaid.

Now, the station owner approached the cell, in company with the gaoler, who unlocked the door and let Joe out to speak with him.

‘Hell, Joey,’ Hann cried. ‘What’s this I hear about you shooting at Mister Cashman?’

Joe clammed up again. He didn’t mean to; it just happened. He looked down at the ground and avoided Hann’s eyes.

‘I can’t help if you don’t talk to me, lad.’

Still, Joe said nothing, arms folded protectively around his body, and eyes glazing over like window shutters. He wanted to go back inside the cell and be like an anteater again.

Hann went on, ‘I hear your old man went and had a word to Cashman. Told him that there was no harm done, and that he should drop the complaint. Jim Cashman said he wouldn’t, and well, I guess that’s his decision.’

There was not even a flicker in Joe’s eyes at the station owner’s words.

Hann shook his head. ‘I’ll help if I can, but I don’t think there’s much I can do.’

It was only when Hann stamped in frustration, and turned to walk away that Joe found his voice. ‘Fifteen years in a stone prison, for the little what I done? I can’t face that, Mister Hann.’

‘You just might have to, Joey, but wait and see, for the judge might sympathise, and I’ll put in a character reference for you.’

The gaoler pushed Joe back inside with the others, and slammed the door. Heavy cast-iron doors, it seemed to Joe, made a sound deeper and more final than any other sound on earth.

In the late afternoon of the next day, when the sun was at its hottest, and the iron-plate wall like a branding iron to the touch, the prisoners were allowed outside to exercise, under the eyes of two warders armed with Martini-Henry carbines.

Joe kept himself apart from the other inmates, now including a bunch of Burns Philp seamen who had been arrested the night before on assault and drunkenness charges. He walked in aimless circles, shoulders slumped and hands in his pockets. So deep was his reverie that he did not heed it at first – a very distant, but high and piercing bird call from outside the prison grounds. When it came again, however, he stopped walking and listened – a clear twin whistle, with the second note higher in pitch than the first.

Every muscle and nerve in Joe's body came alive. That was the call of a quail-thrush, a creature of the mulga a thousand miles to the south of Normanton. Joe knew with deep certainty that there was only one person who could so perfectly mimic that bird. Somewhere, outside those walls, was his mother, and she was calling him.

Joe looked at the guards. They had noticed nothing. Now he eyed off the walls. They were ten feet high, but someone had stacked some firewood for the kitchens quite close. If the stack held it could be used to help jump the full height of the wall, and he was not lacking in agility. The iron would be hot, yes, but his hands were callused from hard work.

Joe waited until the guards were distracted, one tamping his pipe, carbine held in the crook of his arm. The other man was trying to get a vesta to strike.

Sprinting towards the wall, Joe instinctively chose the right moment, jumped for the wood pile, then used his left foot on the peak to take a flying leap. He was a born athlete, and his fingers just managed to grip the top of the burning hot iron. With a tremendous heave of his shoulder and arm muscles he lifted himself, his face contacting the hot metal in the process, yet his knee rising just high enough to

find the top of the wall. Adroitly Joe's left foot came up, and for an instant he stood poised with both feet on the edge.

A rifle discharged, and a bullet stung through the air like a wasp. Joe cocked his knees and jumped, and for a young man who'd been thrown by rough horses since the age of five or six, landing safely on the hard ground was no challenge, using the flex in his legs and ankles to absorb the impact.

Wasting no time in recovery, he ran with all his considerable speed, heading into the sun, across the series of horse paddocks and outbuildings that made up the police reserve. Ahead he could see the start of the bush. If only he could make it before the police were out and mounted up.

Joe's luck held. Within a minute he was dodging saplings and termite hills. His hearing was as sharp as a wallaby's, and again he heard the quail-thrush call. He altered his direction a fraction.

The bird call sound moved seemingly as fast as he was. It was eerie, almost supernatural. He reached a shallow gully, where the wattle and box trees grew more thickly, and was sprinting up the other side when the call came again to his left. He saw a fallen bloodwood trunk, and then his mother's face appeared from behind it, beckoning him to her.

He saw what she had done, hollowed a space in the soil beneath the decaying base – a small cave, and as Joe slithered in beside her, she raked a cache of branches and leaves in behind them.

For a long time there was silence. Twenty minutes or more. Then the sound of hoofbeats and shouting voices, close at first, then fanning out into the distance.

'They'll be back,' Kitty whispered.

'... and track me here,' Joe whispered, but Kitty shook her head and showed him the pair of his old boots that she had worn, crisscrossing the area, heading out in a dozen false trails. 'All night I done that,' she said.

Kitty was right, though, the police came back to search the area again. Mother and son lay close together, listening to the sounds of the hunt around them, often fading into the distance, sometimes very close. Once Joe saw a pair of police boots so near that he felt he could have reached out and touched them. Soon, however, the man passed on by.

Once the night was fully dark, Kitty and Joe left their hiding place.

‘Listen good, Joe,’ she said. ‘You walk to Magoura Station, Missus Franny Trimble expecting you, and will be ready with horses and tucker. By and by you ride for the Nicholson River. Your father is heading there directly, with plenty tucker for you to get to the Territory.’

‘Where will I meet him?’

‘You savvy that place close by Nudjabarra, the little waterhole, where we all three of us camp that time?’

‘I know it.’

‘That’s where you meet him. Then he’ll tell you where to go.’

Joe hugged her with happiness. He should have known that his family would look out for him.

Kitty again donned Joe’s old boots. ‘I’ll lead them away,’ she said, ‘give ‘em a good trail to follow up tomorrow.’

They embraced one last time, then Joe watched his mother melt into the shadows and disappear.

Joe gave Kitty a start, then prepared for his departure. Travelling the eighteen miles to Magoura on foot, however, didn’t appeal. Instead he worked his way from the scrub near the prison into the township, keeping to the shadows when he could, and avoiding the pubs.

With a race meeting scheduled for the following week, many of the contenders were already in town, being put through their paces on the track each

day. Joe made his way out to the paddock in which several of these racehorses were grazing. He recognised the stallion Marathon, belonging to a carrier called Darcy, a horse that beat the field every year at the Normanton and Burketown carnivals. He was a lively, spirited animal, just the kind that Joe loved to ride.

His next step, however, was to hurry back to the police station. Where else would he find the best saddlery in the township? The stable door was held by iron staples, but Joe levered them out as quietly as he could. Once inside he visited the tack room, choosing a saddle blanket, bridle and saddle. As an afterthought he chose a felt hat from a peg, and placed it on his head. Looking just like any bushman heading home, he walked openly down the street.

Marathon, in Joe's mind at least, seemed to be waiting for him to return, snuffing the air. Hadn't his father said that his boy was part horse? Joe spent a precious minute or two stroking the stallion's neck, asking for and offering trust. The animal seemed to come alive at a sense of adventure in the offing, a change from the tedium of the racetrack. He stamped and snorted a little as Joe fed the bit into his mouth, tightened the chin strap, then gently positioned the saddle and tightened the girth.

Their friendship sealed, Joe walked Marathon with a loose hand on his bridle, through the gate and ever so quietly out of town, wrinkling his nose at the smells of civilised life, the smoke from kitchen stoves, cooked food, and chicken coops.

With a sense of leaving that settled world behind, rejecting it utterly, Joe swung up into the saddle, and set off for Magoura Station at a canter.

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