

Jackie FRENCH

Clancy of the Overflow

Sometimes I dream
of Clancy ...



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Clancy of The Overflow

I had written him a letter which I had, for want of better
Knowledge, sent to where I met him down the Lachlan, years ago;
He was shearing when I knew him, so I sent the letter to him,
Just 'on spec', addressed as follows: 'Clancy, of The Overflow'.

And an answer came directed in a writing unexpected,
(And I think the same was written with a thumbnail dipped in tar);
'Twas his shearing mate who wrote it, and *verbatim* I will quote it:
'Clancy's gone to Queensland droving, and we don't know where he are.'



In my wild erratic fancy visions come to me of Clancy
Gone a-droving 'down the Cooper' where the Western drovers go;
As the stock are slowly stringing, Clancy rides behind them singing,
For the drover's life has pleasures that the townsfolk never know.

And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him
In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended,
And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars.



I am sitting in my dingy little office, where a stingy
Ray of sunlight struggles feebly down between the houses tall,
And the foetid air and gritty of the dusty, dirty city
Through the open window floating, spreads its foulness over all.

And in place of lowing cattle, I can hear the fiendish rattle
Of the tramways and the buses making hurry down the street,
And the language uninviting of the gutter children fighting
Comes fitfully and faintly through the ceaseless tramp of feet.

And the hurrying people daunt me, and their pallid faces haunt me
As they shoulder one another in their rush and nervous haste,
With their eager eyes and greedy, and their stunted forms and weedy,
For townfolk have no time to grow, they have no time to waste.

And I somehow rather fancy that I'd like to change with Clancy,
Like to take a turn at droving where the seasons come and go,
While he faced the round eternal of the cashbook and the journal —
But I doubt he'd suit the office, Clancy, of 'The Overflow'.

A.B. Paterson

Chapter 1

Bombe Imperiale

6½oz rice, 4oz fine white sugar, 2pt fresh cream, 7oz glacé apricots, cherries and pineapple (chopped fine), yolks of 4 eggs

Simmer rice in cream till soft. Beat in the yolks while rice is hot, stir in a low fire for two verses of the anthem. Add the fruit. Place in a copper bowl in a larger bowl of chipped ice mixed with rock salt. Stir till the mixture thickens then place in a bombe mould. Keep on ice before turning out. Decorate with sugared violets before serving with raspberry puree.

SYDNEY, NOVEMBER 1869

CLANCY

The harbour sang with sunlight. The seagulls danced. Even the smoke from the steamship's funnels seemed to waltz as Horatio Clancy cuffed the urchin trying to pick his pocket on the crowded wharf, then stared at the young woman gazing anxiously at the faces of those who waited on the wharf as she stood among the other First Class passengers on deck.

It was love at first sight.

This was convenient. The marriage had been arranged a year earlier, across six thousand miles. *The Honourable Flora McPherson, daughter of Lord Angus McPherson and Lady Angus, of Buccleuch Abbey, Northumberland, to wed*

Mr Horatio Clancy, only son of Mr Ezekiel Clancy, of Overflow, in the colony of New South Wales, and his wife Mary (deceased).

The notice did not mention that Ezekiel Clancy had been transported more than forty years before for stealing twelve bags of turnip seed, nor that his wife had been an Irish orphan, taught cookery and scrubbing by the nuns, then sent as a child to earn her keep in the colony of Australia, where men outnumbered women perhaps forty to one, and a talent for cookery or even scrubbing was rare.

Flora's red hair flamed like a sunrise. Her dress and sunshade glowed immaculately white. Even though he had only seen a miniature of her, painted by her aunt, the Honourable Flora McPherson was unmistakable. She still looked so very young.

And she was his.

Clancy knew the moment when Flora saw him too. He lifted his top hat so she could see his face more clearly. She smiled, a look of total joy, and he knew that somehow, miraculously, at the first sight of him — tall, tanned, dressed in his frock coat and waistcoat — she felt the bond between them too. He felt a sudden deep gratitude to Maria, who had assiduously perused English magazines so his tailor could be given the exact patterns for the latest in gentlemen's apparel.

The waves splashed and the wharf creaked under the waiting crowd, mostly ex-convicts in faded drab, watching for families they had not seen for the decades it had taken to save enough to bring them across the world. Of course the steerage passengers would not be allowed on deck until the First Class passengers had disembarked.

Clancy watched as Flora turned to give instructions to the black-clad woman who held the parasol over her head. That must be Sarah, her maid.

If the sky fell now, he thought, he would still be smiling, not just at the sight of Flora, but from knowing he had at last achieved his father's ambition. The grandchildren of Ezekiel Clancy, ex-convict, would be aristocrats.

Ezekiel had endured a long journey to this marriage: saving enough for a mob of drought-thin sheep back in the dry 1840s, when you could buy a barren holding for the cost of a pair of trousers; herding the creatures across the mountains, half of them dying on the way; finally following the track of Cecil Drinkwater, who'd persuaded a native girl to show him where a river ran, despite the drought.

Drinkwater had politely suggested Ezekiel keep moving his mob downriver, beyond his own claim, to 'the Overflow' — a plain below the hills with a dozen channels where moisture seeped even in the dry times, and the river filled every time it flooded. In an uncharacteristic burst of imagination, Ezekiel named it 'Overflow'.

Ezekiel grew rich when gold was found nearby, selling mutton to the miners of Gibber's Creek. The rush soon ended, but Overflow grew wealthier with the British demand for wool to make uniforms for the Crimea. Finally the influence of squatters with far better connections than Ezekiel Clancy — but with similar vast fortunes from the high prices for wool and mutton — had ensured he and they legally owned the vast estates they'd claimed.

Ezekiel planned a dynasty. His son would be a gentleman. His granddaughters would be presented by their aristocratic relatives to the Queen.

The gangplank was secured. Clancy waited, top hat in hand, as the passengers slowly made their way down to the wharf, followed by maids and valets carrying portmanteaux. The heavy trunks would be delivered later.

His gaze was not able to move away from her, her delicacy, the vividness of hair and clothes. But what should he say? No one had ever taught him what to say to the aristocratic bride he had never met.

Ezekiel had not made the mistake of attempting to send his son to an English boarding school; none would have accepted the child of an ex-convict. Clancy's mother had taught the boy

his basic letters and, when Mary died at Maria's birth, Ezekiel hired a tutor. 'Gentleman Once' held a degree from Oxford, though he all too often held a bottle of rum as well.

Even before he was sent to board at the King's School at Parramatta, Clancy could read Latin, speak like a gentleman, and write with a gentleman's hand. He even rode like a gentleman too, not with the relaxed slouch of a drover.

There had been no tutors for Maria, of course, just the widow of one of the stockmen to look after her, while Ezekiel mourned the loss of a wife who could milk a dozen cows before breakfast and grab a frying pan to smash the snake that had wandered into the kitchen. Such a waste, his Mary's life in exchange for a scrawny girl child who would become a hideous monster by the time she turned four years old.

If Maria had grown normally, Ezekiel would eventually have hired a governess, had her taught the pianoforte, dancing and whatever other fripperies a girl needed for a marriage as equally socially useful as her brother's.

But it had been obvious there'd be no marriage for Maria. The most they could hope for was to keep her out of sight at Overflow. Nor was it worth making the homestead into a squatter's mansion, like Drinkwater, not when it contained a monster. The Clancy family's grand home must be in Sydney, with Maria produced, disguised as far as possible, only on the most necessary occasions, to keep gossip about her at the minimum.

Clancy's smile faded at the thought of his sister. Ezekiel hadn't mentioned Maria in his negotiations with the McPhersons, except as the younger sister who kept house at Overflow, and who would continue to do so while Flora and Clancy lived their fashionable life in the new house in Sydney. Clancy's letters too had only described how Maria loved collecting flowers and painting them.

Clancy's hands clenched in his gloves. They should have prepared Flora, he realised. What if she fled as soon as she saw

her new sister? Or worse — felt herself bound to the family of a monster?

The captain bowed to the Honourable Flora McPherson as she stepped onto the gangplank. Sailors held the other passengers back so she could walk down without being jostled.

The crowd about him muttered at the delay. Clancy ignored them. He moved forwards as Flora stepped onto the wharf, Sarah behind. Now she was closer, he could see that Flora's skin actually had a blush like that of an early peach. No woman in the colony had skin like that. How could anyone be so fresh after a five-month voyage?

And he still couldn't think of a word to say.

'Horatio?' she asked tentatively, the words spoken with the sharp clarity he recognised as truly English upper class.

'They call me Clancy,' he managed, taking care to articulate his vowels as Gentleman Once had taught him.

Flora laughed. This bright bird among the crowd's drab actually laughed. 'Too many jokes about the heroic Horatio holding the bridge against the Etruscans?' she teased. 'Or were you named for Admiral Lord Nelson?'

'You've got the right of it there. I was named for both of them.' And suddenly it was easy. He took her gloved hand, glad that his own were the hands of a gentleman, calloused only where he held the reins — there had been few days spent ringbarking, grubbing roots or shearing for Ezekiel's son. He hesitated, then slowly, leaving her time to retreat, leaned forwards to kiss her.

She did not pull back. Her lips were soft and tasted of peppermint cachous. Her hair smelled of roses.

'Welcome to Australia, Flora.'

'It is beautiful,' she said impulsively, her gloved hand warm in his. 'This extraordinary harbour, the fine houses overlooking their own small beaches, so many flowers in the gardens. I had not expected ...'

... *it to be so civilised*. Both knew the words were best not said.

He spoke the words closest to his heart. ‘I know it’s not London, or Paris. But anything you want — anything at all that will make you happy here — the ships can bring.’

‘I think I already have all I will ever need,’ she said quietly, gazing up to look into his eyes. This time it was she who stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

‘Look at the camera and count to sixty, Your Ladyship, Mr Clancy.’ The photographer from the *Illustrated Sydney News* arranged his tripod for the lithograph that would appear on the next day’s front page: *Lady Flora McPherson Arrives to Wed Grazier’s Son*.

The Honourable Flora would be Lady Flora forever now, in the minds of Sydney society.

Chapter 2

Raspberry Spiders

Place 1 dash raspberry syrup in a tall glass; add 2 scoops vanilla ice cream. Top with lemonade. Serve with a long spoon and a straw.

GIBBER'S CREEK, APRIL 1979

JED

The drought-stained air outside the hospital smelled of dust and snakes, coiled under hot rocks in sun-seared paddocks, lucky to have eaten enough spring frogs to keep the reptiles alive for a further year of drought before summer drank the pools. But Sam's room was cool, the air sharp with disinfectant and the faint scent of tubing as he breathed in, then out, his eyes shut, his body as still as it had been since his accident seven months before.

Nancy sat in the room's only armchair, while Jed perched on the bed, her warm hand holding her husband's cold one. She shook her head. 'Nancy, that's balderdash. Love at first sight! Who believes in that rubbish?'

'Me,' said Nancy mildly. 'I fell in love with Michael at first sight.' She smiled reminiscently. 'Nearly forty years ago now.'

'But you'd known him all your life!'

'And not seen him for three years. I fell in love with him the moment I saw him again.'

‘I’m not writing a book about you and Michael.’

‘You certainly are not,’ agreed Nancy. ‘I don’t mind telling you about Grandpa Clancy and Gran, but Michael and I are off limits.’

‘But this Flora woman wasn’t your grandmother. Tell me about *Rose!*’ Jed put Sam’s hand down carefully, then picked up her notebook again. And Sam breathed in, breathed out, the heart of her life forever, even if this was all he did until he died.

He was her Sam, whose last words from his broken body had been, ‘I know your name now. It’s Darling.’ And so part of her day, every day, and their daughter’s day too, was lived here.

Luckily her work could be done at a bedside, writing another book to equal *Matilda’s Last Waltz*, released only two months back, and on the bestseller list — only halfway up, to be sure — for three weeks.

She looked at Nancy, exasperated. ‘This is supposed to be one of Australia’s great love stories. Clancy of the Overflow and the Indigenous girl he gave up everything for.’

Nancy grinned and took another forkful of passionfruit sponge. It did not need the endowment of the new Ben Clancy Rehabilitation Wing to make sure that Nancy of the Overflow received tea and the best cake in the kitchen each time she visited the hospital. Sam McAlpine was loved, as Jed was too, to her slight astonishment, as well as the fourteen-month-old girl currently crawling under her father’s bed to investigate the levers that made it go up and down.

‘Mattie, come out of there.’ Jed hauled her daughter out.

‘Here, give her to me.’ Nancy fed Mattie two forkfuls of passionfruit sponge, wiped the cream off the small hands and mouth, then carried the toddler to the open window. ‘Clancy! Take Mattie to the seesaw for a while.’

The boy balanced on a gum-tree branch, holding his camera at a ridiculous angle. Clancy Thompson did not realise that cameras were to take proper photos of relatives lined up saying cheese for the camera, or portraits of people dressed in their best

for birthday or weddings, not of twisted gum-tree limbs or sheep dogs grinning after they'd got every single sheep into the yard. 'Mum, do I have to? I'm just ...'

'Now,' ordered Nancy. She waited till the boy held up his arms for Mattie before adding, 'And I'll buy you another three rolls of film on Saturday.'

'And pay for their developing?' bargained Clancy. He was tall as a sapling now, all legs and freckles, his camera strung almost permanently around his neck, taken off only to shower, swim or sleep.

'And pay for the developing,' agreed Nancy.

'Cool bananas!' Clancy settled Mattie on his hip, his camera carefully out of her reach. He headed towards the playground that had been added when the children's rehab wing was opened.

Nancy sat back with her cake. 'You were saying?'

'Your grandfather married Rose! She was the love of his life. Not this Honourable what's-her-name.'

'The Honourable Flora.' Nancy looked at Jed patiently. 'People can fall in love more than once. Granddad was more than twenty years older than Gran. Did you think he waited till he was middle-aged to fall in love?'

'But that's not the story I want.'

'What do you want?'

Jed absently held Sam's cold hand against her heart again and stared out the window. Dusty banksia bush planted by the Hospital Board Garden Committee (President A. Sampson) wilted under a sky unendingly blue with a red tinge of the outback slowly blowing away to the sea. Mattie shrieked with joy as Clancy used a foot to make the merry-go-round spin faster for her while he held her safely on the seat.

'I want to tell the story of Australia,' Jed said at last. 'The real story. History books are mostly dead white men in towns and cities. I want to write books that tell the women's history, the bush history, all the important parts that haven't been told.'

‘Flora is part of that history too. If it hadn’t been for Flora, Gran might never have survived, much less married Granddad. Women like Flora are as much a part of our history as Gran.’

Jed said nothing, her hand still in Sam’s. One day I will be sitting here and he’ll open his eyes, she thought. He’ll smile at me and ...

Suddenly she could pretend no longer. She let the tears come.

‘Jed ...’ Nancy’s arms were comforting. ‘Jed, darling ...’

‘Sam’s not going to wake up, is he?’

‘Possibly not. But you knew that ...’

‘Not really. I told myself I did, but hearing you say now that it’s possible to love more than one person ...’

‘You no longer feel you have to spend your life in a hospital room? One day you might even fall in love again?’

Jed moved back slightly. ‘Okay, maybe it is possible to fall in love more than once. But if there is just the slightest chance Sam knows I’m here, I’m not leaving him alone.’

‘And we’re not leaving you alone to sit with him,’ said Nancy quietly, sitting down again. ‘Not me and Michael, or Blue and Joseph or any of your friends, or Sam’s. We’re here for you. Always.’

‘I know. Thank you.’

‘Now may I tell you the story of Clancy of the Overflow? Even if it’s not the one you expected?’

Jed managed to smile. ‘Yes. I’m a fine one to talk, aren’t I, saying I want to write the truth then objecting when you try to tell it to me?’

‘All right then. It was love at first sight, just as I said ...’