

The Ghost of Old Ted

'Your brother Gough talks convincingly of Ted
(I picture him now, putting horses in the shed,
Tunelessly whistling - Ted was always whistling)
So Jim, please, allow me to ask you one thing -
What I really need for your family to tell
Is how young Gough knows of Ted so well,
What understanding can a youth have of Ted
After all the years the old man's been dead?

You see, there's always weird talk around town
And I'd like to quell the wildest parts down;
Time moves slow in the Wet, old ringers trade wise
Words just like coins - in a town this size
Stories linger like wood-smoke, and it's true,
Though tall enough some *are* true blue,
And Station rumour always *has* said
That Ted never left where his blood was shed!

I still see him squatting there, worn hat pushed back,
Just off the edge of a steep weathered track,
Tending his campfire, rabbit a-stewing,
Eyes closed, teeth stained from 'baccy chewing,
As stockmen surge through Twenty-Mile Gate,
All riding so hard, anxiously late,
Wishing now that the Muster was done
To escape to Town 'ere the Wet's begun.

Ted whistles as always as they pass by,

Quite tuneless and flat, like a plaintive cry,
It still echoes across the ridges out there,
In far lonely gullies it sure gives you a scare;
While rounding and cursing the last of the herd
They hear the whistle, at first think it's a bird,
'Til hushed word passes fearfully 'round –
It's dusk, on Ted's old stomping ground!

By spinning 'Ted' yarns, Gough has a reason
To stay in the pub all rainy season,
But he's still so new to Territory lore
I'm surprised he has sufficient store
Of Life's experience, to cast such a spell
Around the old scenes, as if known well
From daily treading the paths Ted took –
It's just like he reads tales from a book!

Imagine Gough there, old ringers all 'round,
Holding the townsfolk quite spellbound
'How is it', they ask, 'a lad soon from school,
Bereft of Life's accumulated tools
Only gathered with slow-passing years,
Can so well document laughter and tears?'
Then gossip flies more wildly than before –
That's why I'm writing to you, for sure!

For there's some who say, in fearful hushed tone,
Spreading it fast on the bush telephone,
That the reason he yarns so convincingly
Is that he talks through the ghost of Ted, you see!

If you think we're all barmy, not really too bright,
We'll send *you* off yonder for too-many-a-night
Alone in the bush, you'll see why they think
Old Ted's still here – and it's not from the drink!

There's that tuneless whistle - it follows around,
As I've said, when they're on Ted's old ground,
It whispers, hangs like mist in the gullies and rills,
Echoes and moans around far blue hills,
Like a murmur that haunts the land itself –
It's enough to affect our mental health.
Folks from the city can say what they will –
Out here, Ted rides the stock tracks still!

It moans so much in Paperbark Run
That they ride one hand to a loaded shotgun;
There's not one of them we can get to go
Near the boundary at the Overflow,
It whistles there like a symphony
Around their heads in a cacophony;
When it prickles the backs of their necks enough
They swing 'round quickly – to see only Gough!

As Gough nears Ted's horse, old fiery black Ginny,
There's barely a snort and never a whinny,
She stands silently trembling, all a-quiver,
It's enough to make stockmen white-in-the-liver!
No one else has been near her for years
She sends other new stockmen packing, in fear,
Eyes flashing, hooves flailing, nostrils a-flaring -

As if her support of old Ted she's declaring!

Then there is Blue, Ted's decrepit old dog
Lying around like a slow-rotting log,
With mournful dark eyes and cattle-dog face,
He watches with care when you come near his space;
When Gough is around the tail even wags
As he struggles to his feet, the stumpy leg sags
While he limps after Gough anywhere he goes –
Then stops Gough's escape by lying 'cross his toes!

I guess that I've said quite enough for now,
'Spose there's nothing much in it anyhow.
It's just that some talk the blokes have spread
Around these parts, well, it fills me with dread;
And I wonder about your young brother's plight,
Unless your reply can quickly shed light
On any connection with Ted down the years –
So we can dispel the town's fast-rising fears!

If he creeps 'round whistling with such great stealth
Then I can't guarantee his continued good health;
I'm worried the stockmen will knock him out –
One of 'em's already given him a clout –
If they get edgy enough on some wild dark night
When Gough slyly decides to give 'em a fright
At a lonely stock camp in a distant gully –
Well, they won't care whose reputation they sully!

He's stupid to think we could still fear Ted,

Everyone remembers when his blood was shed,
If he thinks he fools us, the silly young sod,
Then it won't be long 'til *he* gets the nod...
...Wait, there's fearful footsteps comin' up the hall
And I hear that familiar old stockman's call,
When that sound echoes I see Ted's wry grin...
Ah! It must just be Gough playing tricks agin!

...I hear a whistle, hang on a minute,
The homestead was empty, but *somethin's* in it!
It's eerily cold in here so sudden,
My heart and mind both feel quite leaden;
When you read this even *I* could be dead,
So I want you to know – it's because of old Ted...
...*Crikes*, he's comin' to get me, *Oh Lordy*, Jim
How *could* Ted have known that *I* done him in?"

