

Bullfry at the end of the dinner

By Lee Aitken (illustrated by Poulos QC)



Another large Scotch, ‘chasing’ a bottle and a half of red, suffused him – the first Mrs Bullfry used to complain that he was ‘all mania’ and ‘no depression’ – he could feel the mania slowly gaining a foothold now – how would this evening end? As it usually did? What did the Bard say?

A man may drink, and not be drunk,
a man may fight and not be slain,
a man may kiss a bonnie lass,
and still be welcome home again!

He looked around circumspectly – his cummerbund was beginning to give way, revealing the bottom of a torso which demanded a full figure ‘rashie’ before he could decently venture into the ocean. The eminent federal jurists had long since fled in their Commonwealth cars to the safety of domesticity; only one was left heavily in his cups – an occupant of the bench of a lesser territory who was now entirely legless – Bullfry had known him for over 30 years, in court and out – he would need to get him safely to rest at his hotel to avoid a report in some scandal sheet. The bevy of young barristerettes who had been present only a moment before had disappeared in the company of more callow and attractive admirers – his perception of

time was becoming ‘existential’ which meant that four hours might pass in the blink of an eye. He counselled himself to avoid the dive off Macleay Street where he had ended up a year ago on stage with the girl, and the snake, after the festivities – he needed a companion – and who better?

‘How are you fearless leader? Where are we headed?’

‘My boy – uptown, I think. – Baron’s has closed for a refit, but I know a small shebeen where we would be most welcome. I managed to reverse the forfeiture of its lease only recently – the usual ridiculous allegations involving non-payment of rent, fire orders, and the ‘use’ clause – some complaint concerning a ‘common bawdy house’ about which, as I told the duty judge, there is a large amount of old, and important, learning’.

‘That sounds just the ticket – who is else is in?’

‘Fatty’ has had to retire early because of cricket tomorrow; ‘Puddles’ is already flat – it may just be you and me to start with but no doubt the ‘team’ will grow as the troops reassemble – give me a hand here with ‘the chief’.

Together, they struggled with their unsteady companion down to a nearby rank, and fought their way aboard

a cab. After dropping their passenger at the Marriott, they alighted exuberantly amidst a thronging crowd, no-one of whom, unsurprisingly, was wearing a dinner jacket.

'Turn it on for later on! Turn it on for later on!' – Bullfry could well imagine the result if he returned at cockcrow and endeavoured to follow that advice – he avoided the tattooed Islander, and followed his boon companion down the steps. Was this a wise idea? After a dinner past, the Floor had foregathered and drunk on into the dawn – this had not found favour with his companion's better half. On that memorable occasion, with colleagues severally holding his companion's arms and legs, they had knocked timorously at the matrimonial door to be greeted by his benighted, and 'benightied', spouse who had said simply: 'Leave him on the porch!'

And what of his own wake-in-fright moment, after the '03 dinner? He had fallen into bad company, lost track of time and place, and awoke agog and befuddled in a matinal crepuscular gloom. He had rolled over in a bed, checked his watch with horror, and said to his companion, 'Ye Gods! Is that the time? – I had better be getting home', to be greeted with: 'You are home!'

Blinking against the strobe lighting, the two wayfarers went down the mirrored staircase – a smiling 'waitress' thrust a bin of VB into Bullfry's trembling hand. The patron of the establishment, newly relieved against its forfeiture, approached and indicated with an expansive gesture where they could sit in comfort, while enjoying the privileges of the house.

'What did you think of the dinner?'

'Right up there with some of the great ones. The guest of honour spoke brilliantly despite the accent – I had never realised before tonight how little I knew, or cared, about the common law of New Zealand'.

'Yes, but I thought their chief justice performing the haka in traditional dress, before the start of his speech, was a little over the top – I'm all for local customs, but what does that nose-rubbing, and the greeting with the tongue, really mean? Miss Junior didn't quite know how to respond. And mentioning the Bledisloe early on – always a mistake at what is, after all, a Waratah's venue. Thank goodness security stopped that common law bloke from reaching the stage – anything might have happened.'



'You're right – and it wasn't a good look when Freddy, at the end of his speech, misjudged the distance and nearly fell off the podium. Still, these things happen and it is always nice to get out for the evening – as well, attendance helps one to confirm who is still alive, and who is not'.

It was another night to forget – hours passed. The boon companions drank on steadily as sunrise approached, and at the usual time Bullfry provided funds for the traditional hamburger and chips. Slowly, slowly the sun rose – it rose on no happier sight than men of good abilities, and emotions, conscious of the blight which was upon them, and relieved that, for one evening at least, it could be allowed to eat them away.

They staggered out to greet the dawn from the Stygian depths – somewhat dishevelled, and merry.

Bullfry began with his favourite refrain in such a situation:

'And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light,
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward - look! – the land is bright'.

But it was to the East that they turned as they began the long and sobering march up Oxford Street.

'Bondi at nine for a quick dip, I think – and then some chambers work to blow away the cobwebs!' said Bullfry, straightening his bowtie and cummerbund which had been displaced during a restless interlude.