

"THE BLOKE."

BY MONTGOMERY BARR.

Illustrated by Ashley Hunter.

I.

"EVENIN'," said he, as he walked in, followed by his dogs, "'ow are ye doin'?"

Seating himself on my bed he pulled out a pipe and prepared to fill it. He did not remove the soft felt hat, of no particular shape, that adorned his head. He was in his working garb—muddy water-tight boots, loosely belted trousers of blue dungaree, a dark shirt and an olive-green coat. All bushmen's every-day coats are green. It is reported that these coats were originally of some more conventional colour. It may be so. There he sat—the Bloke, so self-styled—full of friendly intentions, and diffusing a mingled odour of tobacco, onions and honest toil.

"Good evening, Mr. Drake," I responded.

"Oh, I say, stash the 'mister'! Plain Bill and Jim is good enough between workin' blokes."

I winced. I had never before realised that I was plain Jim, a working bloke. But looking round me at my whare of white pine palings, my fireplace of slabs and clay, my home-made furniture, I felt compelled to admit the appropriateness of the description.

"Do ye like batching?" inquired the Bloke, kindly.

"Not very well. I don't allow my dogs indoors."

He lit his pipe with care.

"If you wouldn't mind sending your dogs out——"

"Them two dawgs." He beamed affectionately upon the curs. "What they don't know aint worth knowin'. Why, me and

Ike 'Arvey, we was up at Long Pat's whare on Sunday, and Pat 'e was pitchin' about a dawg as 'e give ten pound for. I says: 'Pat, I'll lay ye a fiver——'"

"Send your dogs out, Drake."

"Oh, all right! Ye're easy narked, mate," he complied, snorting contemptuously. Then he entertained me for an hour with tales of his own sagacity and that of his dogs. From past experience I guessed that he had not come merely to amuse me, and while he talked I wondered what he wanted. At last he said, "I 'eard as 'ow ye wanted some timber sawn."

"Yes. I need a floor and a partition in this whare, and two front rooms of sawn timber added."

"Ye'll be bringin' in yer family?"

"Yes, before winter begins, if possible."

"Well, I'm yer man. Me and Ike 'Arvey, we always saws together. When I 'ear of it. I says to my mate: 'There's a bonnyfide settler for you. Not like the blokes as takes up land just to 'ave a cut in at the Gurment work. Family man, too. Ought to be 'elped. Let's cut 'is timber for 'im, and maybe give 'im a 'and with the buildin'.' So I come up 'ere."

"Very good of you, I'm sure."

"Oh, don't name it! Ike 'Arvey, 'e's just the same: ready to knock off whatever 'e's doin' and go and 'elp any poor bloke as needs 'elp. 'Ow much would ye be wantin' now?"

"I haven't reckoned it up yet. The new part will be twenty-four by twelve, in two rooms. What do you charge for sawing?"

He smiled benignly. "That'll-be all right, mate. Make yer mind easy."