



“YES, gentlemen,” said the Custom House Officer, as we sat on the deck-rails and smoked, one fine evening in Sydney Harbour, while the crowded pleasure steamers passed and repassed on their journeys to Manly and Mosman’s Bay. “Yes; I’ve followed the sea myself for years before I got this job under the Commonwealth, and I’ve been in all classes of vessels from a Yankee brigantine to a P. and O. steamer, but the queerest craft I ever struck, was a Murray River steamer called the ‘Belle of Mildura.’ I happened to leave a ship at Adelaide, and from there I went up country for a spell, and worked on a sheep-station. However, I soon grew tired of that, so I shipped as deck-hand aboard the ‘Belle of Mildura.’

“The ‘Belle’ was just an old barge about ninety feet long. She had a bridge and deck-house built on to her, and her engines were just an ordinary threshing machine with an elongated shaft and two paddle-wheels affixed.”

“How did they get that engine over its dead centre?” enquired the Chief Engineer.

“Well,” replied the Customs official, “after the engineer had turned on steam, and the moorings

were let go, all hands had to clap their weight on to the paddle-wheels, and heave round for half a turn. That’d get her started; and unless the steam ran back, she’d seldom stick. But to proceed with the yarn. She carried six hands all told. Captain, engineer, two deck-hands, a stoker and a Chinese cook.

“I soon found that I hadn’t struck a very soft job. The pay I received as deck-hand was six pounds a month and tucker, and I guess I earned it all—every cent. We started away up the river with a cargo of barbed wire for Burke just after the heavy rains, when the current was running fairly strong. The utmost speed that we could get out of the ‘Belle’ was six knots an hour, and she was a demon to burn fuel. The furnace was fed with logs of gum, and every evening just before sunset our craft was tied up to the bank, while the skipper sent us all ashore to chop up dead gum trees. We then had to carry the logs aboard, and stack them near the furnace for the next day’s fuel. We used to make another start at sunrise, and during the day one man took the wheel while another passed logs to the stoker, and took frequent spells at the pump, because the heavy cargo of barbed wire had made the old tub leak. When the captain found out that I’d been a deep-water sailor, and held a second