



Learning the hard way

“Jesus, that was a stupid thing to do!”

I looked down at my left hand; blood streaming from the third digit; still not much pain, but I sensed it was on the way. I was in an inaccessible spot, at the bottom of a deep gully on the edge of the bush; the boss had sent me there to complete a section of fencing we had been working on together. An hour before, I had almost stepped on a big black snake ... the deadly variety. Not a good day.



Busy putting tension on the top barbed wire, I must have been dreaming of more worldly pursuits – probably the boss’s beautiful daughters – when the fence strainer let go of the wire. The stupid part was that I was holding onto that same wire with my left hand. The

barbs ripped back through my hand, almost removing one finger!



For my long summer break from college I’d been allocated this remote property, near Ensay in the hills of Gippsland, Victoria. It was a rural block some 200 kilometres East of the Melbourne metropolis, but so remote it could have been in the Simpson Desert! For ten

weeks I existed in this giant farmland cul-de-sac, surrounded by native bush.

It turned out to be a fantastic place for a working holiday, with expanses of steep pastured fields, and more koalas, cockatoos, snakes and kangaroos, than the numbers of Angus beef and Polwarth sheep, under my interim charge. Whilst there, I learnt to ride a horse, drive a car, build a fence, and castrate burgeoning fat lambs with my teeth!

As it turned out, the secondment had another much riskier attraction, namely two teenage daughters. I travelled with my boss - their father - to collect them from an elite boarding school on the outskirts of Melbourne; '*Mana from Heaven,*' being my first reaction. In my late teens and testosterone fueled, I lay awake each night, dreaming of the young ladies in the next-door bedroom; but come sunrise, never managed to summon the courage to turn night-time aspirations into daytime reality. This was probably a fortunate outcome; their father - normally a friendly soul – had a quick temper, which I'd experienced after stepping out of line a couple of times on farm duties. Any misdemeanor related to the adored daughters may have brought unspeakable retribution!



Even without the adolescent ladies, this unique experience in the back-of beyond, helped to form my character. I went back to college as a much more mature Australian male; after arriving more like an immigrant youth from England. This had a lot to do with the freedom I was given: to ride a horse on the ridge at sunset, or to drive the boss's car along the mountain highway to Omeo (without driving license of course). In a very broad sense, I was responsible for my actions; there was nobody there to pick up after me. *Jurgen Klopp*, the famous football coach, would have been proud of my boss - who pretended to be an elite pseudo-Englishman, called *Dickie* by his wife – but underneath was a strong Aussie mentor who really knew what he was doing in terms of man-management.

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