

NEW AUSTRALIA

- EPISODE 01 -
'THE STRIKE!'

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Based on: "A PECULIAR PEOPLE" By Gavin Souter
& "THE WORKINGMAN'S PARADISE" By William Lane

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EXT. VALLEY - DAWN

Early morning fog fills a beautiful rural valley. Red dust rises on the horizon.

TITLE: QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA 1891

PULL BACK to reveal a young WATCHMAN (19) resting against a Mulga Tree on a hilltop. He wears a wide-brimmed hat and reads 'The Worker' (Australia's first union owned newspaper).

He eats a 'johnny cake' wrapped in a red handkerchief. He raises what's left to his horse. The horse eats from his hand and nibbles his ear asking for more.

The Watchman swats flies from his face, finishes reading the article and smiles. Then places the newspaper on the ground.

A pyramid of sticks holds a steaming billy over a small fire. The Watchman checks inside. Tea leaves float on top of boiling water.

He taps the side of the billy with a stick, then uses his red handkerchief to pick it up. He swings it round and round over his head. SWOOSH. SWOOSH. SWOOSH. FLING!

On the forth swing the billie goes flying into the scrub below. The young Watchman stands stiff. DEER IN HEADLIGHTS.

He squints, straining to see what's causing the cloud of red dust rising the horizon. He can't quite make it out. Then finally it's revealed-- A RED COACH AND HORSES.

The Watchman snaps into action. He unties and mounts his horse and gallops off in the opposite direction.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAWN

MAJOR P RICARDO (45) (Commanding Officer of the Moreton Mounted Infantry) wears a neat blue uniform with shiny brass buttons.

A red COBB & CO COACH is harnessed to four galloping Clydesdales. FOUR OFFICERS in blue uniforms ride in front, two behind.

The coach overflows with YOUNG MEN inside and on top. A scraggly COACH DRIVER (sixties) WHISTLES 'LA MARSEILLAISE'.

Next to him sits a BEAUTIFUL GIRL (twenties) in a cute dress.

A WOODEN ROADSIGN: **BARCALDINE 5 MILES**

Ricardo raises his hand. His men slow. The YOUNG MEN scan the surrounding valley. Some look worried.

RICARDO
(stiff British accent)
Company. Affix bayonets.

The Officers methodically attach long sharp knives to the ends of their rifles. Officer FRED WHITE (35), grizzled and sinister, glows with excitement at the coming violence.

The Young Men look at the shining daggers with increased anxiety. They chat in hushed tones and continue to scan the surrounding hills for an unknown enemy.

Ricardo and White lead the party forward. All men on high alert, except the Coach Driver who whistles joyfully.

White gives the Coach Driver an EVIL EYE - "shut up". He obeys like a scolded child, then pulls a funny face as soon as White turns his back. The Beautiful Girl smiles.

White spots something up ahead. He raises his hand. Everybody stops. Except Ricardo who continues forward.

RICARDO (CONT'D)
(passing White)
I give the orders round here.

Ricardo rides beyond White to prove his authority. He sees a thin line of smoke rising up ahead. Beat. He turns and rides back through the stationary coach party.

RICARDO (CONT'D)
Men of the Mounted Rifles. I have no fear that you will do your duty like men and soldiers. To do your work faintly would be a grave mistake. If the order is given to fire, don't let me see any rifle point to the sky. Fire low and lay them out, so the duty will not need to be repeated.

The Young Men in the coach are now hysterical with fear. One speaks of escape. Another berates his friend for talking him into this trip. A third prays.

Ricardo motions to move forward slowly. The four Mounted Officers out front point their rifles in the direction of the rising smoke, it's source still hidden behind thick scrub.

The coach party creeps forward. Sweat drips from foreheads. Frightened Young Men duck down low. The scrub begins to clear. The source of smoke slowly reveals itself--

It's a DUSTY OLD SWAGMAN sitting alone by a campfire. He examines the rifles pointed at his head without fear.

SWAGMAN

Alright lads I'll give you some tea
but I'm damn near out of damper
myself!

The Swagman laughs at his own wisecrack. The Officers lower their weapons. The Young Men relax. The Swagman continues to mutter incoherently at first, then his words take shape.

SWAGMAN (CONT'D)

--The beer at The Exchange has got
more Darling River in it than hops
-- Look out for the Shearers Cook
at Acacia Downs, his food's killed
two 'Rousies' already--

The Mounted Officers and Young Men laugh at the mad Swagman, but the Coach Driver tips his hat with respect. The convoy continues forward. Then out of nowhere - BANG! A GUNSHOT.

AN OFFICER AND HIS HORSE FALL FLAT ONTO THE DIRT ROAD. Heads spin searching for the attackers.

DAVE STEVENSON (29), a bronzed, muscular shearer with a swashbuckling mustache, sits calmly on his horse blocking the road ahead. He raises his hands showing he holds no weapon.

The Fallen Officer rises to his feet. He looks meekly at Ricardo, then toward his gun - "It must have malfunctioned". Everything is still and silent. All eyes are on Dave.

Dave tilts his head to one side and smiles gently. His shirt rolled up at the sleeves. His eyes innocent as a child.

BUSHMEN slowly emerge from the scrub on either side. Some on horses, others on foot. They file in behind Dave.

Ricardo looks back to see an equal number of Bushman move in behind the coach. They're trapped. THERE'S NO ESCAPE.

The Bushmen are rough-looking men, mostly in their twenties and thirties. Many sport beards or thick mustaches and all share broad shoulders, sunburnt faces and innocent eyes.

YELLS BEGIN TO SPIKE THE AIR, quiet at first but swelling to a symphony of threats and insults.

BUSHMEN (VARIOUS)

Scabs.
Filthy Blacklegs.
We'll send ya scalps back to
Victoria--

Dave gently whips his reins. His horse walks forward. He moves straight past Ricardo and White without a sideways glance. He tips his hat to the Coach Driver.

DAVE
 (to the Coach Driver)
 How was the ride up Clancy?

Clancy leans down, puts his hand over his mouth pretending to whisper but makes damn sure everyone hears.

CLANCY
 (referring to The Girl)
 The company up here's been terrific.

Dave smiles. He turns his attention to The Girl. He removes his hat with deep respect. It's been months since he's seen beauty of this magnitude and HE'S A CONNOISSEUR.

DAVE
 Ma'am.

The Beautiful Girl blushes. She's intrigued by the wild bushman, maybe even a little in love.

Dave puts his hat back on and moves forward to inspect the passengers. He taps on the window with his knuckles. The scared Young Men inside can't bare to look. Dave sizes them up with a smile.

DAVE (CONT'D)
 (to Ricardo)
 This the best you could find down there mate? A bunch a stringy-looking saplings?

Ricardo turns his horse to face Dave.

RICARDO
 These men are free laborers.

The Bushmen quickly close in around Ricardo, mocking his accent and authority.

Bushmen push past the other mounted Officers, smiling in their faces. Fearless and disrespectful.

Bushmen grab at the Officers horses, causing them to shy. One-by-one they start leading the horses and their mounts into the scrub. The Officers don't put up much of a fight.

Bushmen file past the coach like a circus freak show. A particularly ROUGH BUSHMAN taps shear blades on the window.

ROUGH BUSHMAN
 (double meaning)
 You fella's know how to use a pair of these? We do!

Officer Fred White slaps hands away from his horse's reins and raises his rifle threateningly.

His swings the rifle at an approaching Bushman but is eventually overpowered and led into the bush.

Ricardo is now alone in the middle of the rabble. Bushmen on all sides grab at his uniform and shout jeers and taunts.

The Young Watchman knocks off Ricardo's hat. A HUGE CHEER ERUPTS-- RAAAAAYYYY!

This jolts Ricardo into action. He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a piece of paper. He unfolds and reads.

RICARDO

(reading)

Our Sovereign Lord the King
 chargeth and commandeth all
 persons, being assembled,
 immediately to disperse themselves,
 and peaceably to depart to their
 habitations--

Bushmen mock Ricardo's pomposity, others pay no attention at all. Dave continues to calmly circle the coach, examining the Young Men inside and on top.

Clancy starts whistling again. The Beautiful Girl can't keep her eyes off Dave, the archetypal Aussie bushman.

RICARDO (O.S.) (CONT'D)

--or to their lawful business, upon
 the pains contained in the act made
 in the first year of King George,
 for preventing tumults and riotous
 assemblies.

Dave draws eye-to-eye with Ricardo. He smiles, then SLAPS THE PAPER RIGHT OUT OF HIS HAND. Ricardo states the final words of THE RIOT ACT from memory.

RICARDO (CONT'D)

God Save the King.
 (God save me)

Bushmen on all sides make 'WOAH' and 'BOO HOO' noises to scare Ricardo's horse. It rises up on its hind legs. Bursts through the crowd and gallops away to safety, taking Ricardo with it.

The Bushmen CHEER. Dave raises his hand for hush. Beat.

DAVE

(to the Passengers)

By the looks on ya faces, you
 fella's aren't sure who we are and
 why we're here--

The Young Men nod agreement.

DAVE (CONT'D)

Alright. So I'll tell ya! We're shearers and we're currently out on strike because the fat man refuses to pay us a fair days wage for a fair days work... and the fat man's paid these pretty boys in blue to bring you lads up and take our jobs and end our strike.

(beat)

And we're here to stop ya!

The Bushmen CHEER and YELL INSULTS-- RAAAAAY!

Dave raises his hand again for quiet. The Bushmen obey. Beat.

DAVE (CONT'D)

Now-- We're fair blokes. So we'll give ya the benefit, that when you got on this coach at Bendigo or Ballarat or Fitzroy or wherever ya from-- you didn't know you were taken another man's job and rob'n him of his bread and his dignity.

(beat)

Right?

The Passengers nod and shake their heads - "We didn't know".

DAVE (CONT'D)

But ya know now--
So lads, it's time to decide--
Which side you're on? Are you
working men or strike breakers?

The Passenger negotiate among themselves while the Bushmen educate them on a few alternative words for STRIKE BREAKER.

A YOUNG MAN FROM THE TOP hangs over the side of the coach and chats with the lads inside. He flips back up. The coach window slides open. A SCAB pokes his head out. Beat.

SCAB

(to Dave)

I ain't worked in nine months and I've got a missus and kids in Melbourne-- and one of em's sick--

The Scab breathes deep. A reassuring hand squeezes his shoulder.

SCAB (CONT'D)

(to all the Bushmen)

But I didn't come up here to take no other blokes job and I ain't no scab!

(beat)

And the rest of us boys here--

(MORE)

SCAB (CONT'D)

(beat)

We're with ya's!

HUGE CELEBRATIONS.

The Bushmen shake hands with their new chums as they exit the coach. Clancy throws his hat in the air. Dave winks at the Beautiful Girl, her eyes flame with desire. The mad Swagman dances a crazy dance beside his fire.

INT. THE WORKER HQ - DAY

Copies of 'The Worker' are printed in a large newspaper press. Freshly printed pages are placed atop a huge pile. A delicate male hand reaches down and grabs it.

HIS nose buried in the paper, he follows it forward. His left foot drags. A walking stick dangles from his elbow. He walks up factory steps to the mezzanine level and enters an office.

INT. THE WORKER HQ - LANE'S OFFICE - DAY

Hundreds of books line the walls of a modest office. The desk is covered in newspaper proof-sheets.

WILLIAM LANE (29), a delicate looking man with a heavy drooping mustache and keen blue eyes behind thick gold-rimmed glasses, inspects the print quality of a political cartoon.

OLD MAN (O.S.)

Mr. Lane.

Lane is so focussed he barely hears the frail voice.

OLD MAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Mr. Lane.

Lane peers over the paper to see an EXTREMELY OLD MAN (nineties) sitting on his sofa. He sports a rough grey beard and dark brown skin, revealing a life spent under the sun.

The Old Man struggles to stand. He extends a shaky hand to Lane, who tenderly grasps it in his. Their eyes meet.

Lane speaks with a unique accent, a mixture of his Bristol childhood, his Irish father and the ten years he spent working in Detroit, USA.

LANE

Sorry mate, I didn't see you there.

The old man's eyes are watery and bloodshot. He looks at Lane like a long lost son. Every word he says is a struggle.

OLD MAN

I thought you might like to hear something about Eureka?

Lane smiles and nods agreement. Men of all sorts drift into 'The Worker' office day and night, this isn't a surprise.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

Here's my license, which is what the whole thing started over--

The Old Man pulls a little metal case from his pocket and opens it with pride. He draws out a piece of discolored paper and hands it to Lane like a sacred chalice.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

--and here's a bayonet mark that settled me as nearly as you could think.

The Old Man unbuttons his shirt. Just above the bone, between ear and throat is a mark that stands out white and jagged against his wrinkled bronzed flesh.

OLD MAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

They killed thirty diggers that day. I was one of the fella's who helped Lalor get away.

Lane inspects the license with respect. Then his eyes drift up to the wound. He reaches up and touches it reverently.

LANE

That's a medal no queen could give.

The Old Man smiles. His eyes well with pride.

OLD MAN

Peter Lalor thought the same about his wounded arm when he refused his knighthood.

Lane smiles wider still. The Old Man speaks fast, eager to share his story as if chasing a fast approaching deadline.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

After Eureka I mostly lived by hunting roos out west, where the pelican builds her nest. I lost hope. I used to mutter to myself and wandered alone in the wilderness. Then one day a mailman dropped a copy of 'The Worker'. I took up my swag as Christ took up the cross and walked here. I thought I'd be satisfied to see the place and take an order from Billy Lane before I die.

A lump forms in Lane's throat. He's moved but does his best to hide it. He takes the Old Man's arm and leads him to the office door. Both men limping.

They stand arm-in-arm looking out over Lane's little empire. It's a buzz of activity - Journalists write, cartoonists draw, photographer expose, composers composite--

LANE

Hope it was worth the trip mate?

ALF WALKER (55), a white-haired and jolly compositor, wiggles metal letters into a print frame. He looks up at Lane.

ALF WALKER

(jesting)

How is it that the editor of 'The Worker' never seems to be doing any blanky work?

Lane smiles at his friend. He takes in the sights and sounds of 'The Worker' one more time before turning to the Old Man.

LANE

You play chess?

The Old Man smiles and nods - "Yep".

Lane leads him back into the office and closes the door.

Gold-leaf lettering on the glass: **WILLIAM LANE - EDITOR**

INT. STAGE COACH FACTORY - DAY

A sinewy young male hand dips a brush into gold paint and completes the lettering of **COBB & CO.** with precise strokes.

HE drops the brush into a glass of water and steps back to admire his work. Every detail of the red stagecoach is impeccable but he isn't happy-- He looks for the flaw.

He picks up a fresh paintbrush. Dips it in red paint and gets down on his knees. His eyes are level with a small **UNION JACK FLAG** painted on the side of the coach.

He paints over it in three considered strokes until the flag is gone. Erased. He smiles.

A stern-looking FACTORY MANAGER walks through a different part of the factory, tapping an unopened letter on his palm.

MANAGER

(yelling)

Lawson. Lawson.

The Manager approaches an OLDER FACTORY WORKER screwing wooden spokes into a large wagon wheel.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

You seen Barmy Harry?

The Worker points further down the warehouse. The Manager continues walking, scanning and yelling.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

Lawson! Lawson!

He rounds a stack of wooden pallets, then stops to admire the perfectly painted red coach in front of him. His eyes drift down to the floor. He spots two large boots pointing up.

He walks forward, revealing lanky legs, then a skinny torso and finally the boyish face of HENRY LAWSON (24), awkward, gangly and delicate, with a thin mustache (Later crowned Australia's national poet-- The Poet of the People).

MANAGER (CONT'D)

You deaf mate?

Lawson doesn't respond. He's lost in the beauty of the clouds and birds passing over the factories peaked glass ceiling.

The Manager steps over Lawson, interrupting his view with his crotch. He drops the letter on his chest. Lawson smiles.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

Stop getting your love letters sent here will ya!

Lawson rises awkwardly, examining the envelope. He looks at the Manager for approval. The Manager weakens. He clearly likes Lawson. EVERYBODY LIKES LAWSON.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

Go on then.

Lawson opens the envelope and unfolds the letter. The header reads 'The Worker'. The Manager watches him read.

Lawson's smile grows as he reads down the page. Great pearly drops form in his dark brown eyes. He turns his back to The Manager to hide his emotion.

Lawson refolds the letter and places it in his shirt pocket. He bends down and folds his brushes neatly into a leather wrap and starts walking toward the warehouse door.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

Hang on a minute mate--

Lawson doesn't react. He continues toward the light. Beaming.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

Where do ya think you're going?

OTHER FACTORY WORKERS notice. They shout blue-collar

farewells. Lawson's grand exit has been a long time coming.

A YOUNG APPRENTICE opens the warehouse door wide and gives Lawson a little bow as he approaches. Lawson throws him his leather paint wrap. The Apprentice catches it with joy.

APPRENTICE

Cheers Harry!

We'll miss ya mate.

Lawson walks out. He doesn't look back. Tears stain his cheeks. His chest heaves. He's never been happier.