

*Nearly everybody has laughed at Mr. Percy Leason's bush cartoons in Punch. Their outstanding feature is their extreme naturalness. Everyone has seen their originals in many country towns. In this article, Mr. Leason, thrice as wise as he is, either hides a country boy among the cheerful types who afterward gave him his livelihood.*

SHOW Week is with us again, and everywhere one sees visitors from the country—farmers with sun-tanned faces, their wives, and children. To give you some idea of how I started making drawings of country life.

Suppose I begin where I began myself—at birth. I was born on a farm at Kaniva, near the South Australian border.

I would love to tell a picturesque story of how I became an artist, but my imagination in that line does not work well. However, an indication of my bent towards art was revealed in my struggles to suck the storks and bulrushes off the curtains of my cot. I thought them extraordinarily beautiful, and only recently my mother confirmed that my cot had these decorations, which I still recall.

Just as clear as my recollection of the storks is that of my persecution of an uncle, who could not draw but once made the mistake of drawing a horse for me in one long continuous line. These drawings must have been awful, but I used to pore over them for hours.

I was four at this time, and the thing that made the greatest impression on my imagination was the trains that far out across the plains used to crawl by twice a day. I used to try and draw them. I acquired the habit in those days, and saw nothing odd about it, of lying under trees and trying to put on paper my impressions of the tomtits and other birds that flitted about from limb to limb.

Of course, there was no continuity about these efforts; I had never heard of Art; I just felt I wanted to copy what I saw in Nature around me. Like the usual small kid, my imagination was forced to make what it could of the commonplace things on the farm. There was an old reaper and binder that the fowls used to roost in. I knew it was a reaper and binder, but to me in those days it was a wonderful ship bound for marvelous lands of my own invention. An old rusted chaff cutter engine became for me a lordly express.

When the time came for my father to leave the drought-stricken farm, he took with him one horse and cart.

Soon after this, my little artistic efforts became a bit less sporadic. My world was widening. I developed a real passion for Art. This passion was the cause of a big row I had with my brother. I had drawn a picture of a cherished tame magpie that was free of our house, and my brother had derisively "treated" it so that it looked even less like the original than it had at first. It was my first experience of the destructive critic, and my soul leaped to avenge the insult. With an axe, I went forth to do damage where I knew it would hurt most. My brother had a great engineering bent and was at work on an experiment—a tandem bike. When I had finished with my axe, it looked more like an experiment and less like a bike than my picture had looked like a "maggie."

I'm not sure whether that made us quits. I rather think he had the last word. Even with my greater interest in drawing, there was little continuity in my work.

Then something happened that nearly put an end to my interest in Art. I went to an art school. Twice a week I climbed into the engine of a great friend of mine on the railway and journeyed into town. And the town's name represents what I learned there. It gave me a horror of Art; the lessons were awful drudgery. Then worse happened. A lady teacher of painting settled at Kaniva, and I was sent

to learn from her. She made me copy photographs in oil, and my early enthusiasm continued to vanish. I became fascinated instead by my brother's experiments with wheels and windmills. I still remained profoundly interested in everything my eyes rested on, but I had lost the desire to record it until one evening I took a step which I suppose determined my choice of Art as a career.

At this time, I was employed in driving my father's lorry, and returning home one evening at the end of the day's work with a load of discontent, I noticed a rail had fallen from the doctor's stable fence. Then I discovered that other rails were loose. Having got them home, the question of what to do with them faced me. Without any particular object in mind, I used them as roof timbers to cover the space between an old piano case and the back wall of my father's stable. I covered them with bags and flattened kerosene tins, not so much to hide their identity as to make them watertight. A door I made out of a packing case. All I needed then was a name for the contraption that leaned drunkenly away from the stable. Without much thought, I called it a studio, and unconsciously mapped out thus the course of my life. The object of a studio is Art, and Art immediately became my chief business.

So it came about that at all hours, whenever the opportunity presented itself, I would sneak in and struggle to put down a record of the things that had impressed me during the day. It was a pencil diary, and I little knew how it was to stand me in good stead in the future.

My father at this time carried on business as a wheat agent, and I used to help him by weighing the wheat from the wagons in the station yard at Kaniva. Here I had the priceless opportunity of studying the types of farmers and country dwellers. I got to know everybody in the district. Between the loads, I lay on the bags and listened to them yarning, unconsciously memorising their appearance and thus accumulating a fund of material that was to prove invaluable later on. And then in the evenings, I would sneak into my studio as soon as I reached home, and there endeavour with my pencil to record the impressions of the day. Naturally, I developed a very keen memory, and I might add that it is upon memory that I have always depended. I have never used a sketchbook.

About this time, I began to send in drawings for a children's column of a Melbourne weekly paper, and a number of them were published. I was ecstatic about the future, and then my uncle tipped me 10/ and, acting on a sudden impulse, I came to Melbourne. This and the published specimens of my efforts led to my being apprenticed to Sands and McDougall as a lithographer for five years. It was a lucky visit for me because I left behind a contract of indenture with a local builder for seven years at house painting! I stayed my five years at lithography and was sacked the day they came to an end, so I gathered I had not given entire satisfaction! There followed years of freelancing and commercial art and painting, and then at last I had my first chance on a newspaper. I was asked to do a drawing of a country show. I was up against it because I had no idea how to do it. I sweated over the problem. Then it suddenly came to me. "Why not draw from memory?" To my astonishment, I found it extraordinarily easy to call up clear-cut memories of those types I had seen in the station yard at Kaniva. That was my first start.

All sorts of old memories come crowding back on me as I draw. When I put a village post office on paper, or draw a tennis match in the bush, I think of my old playmates and draw from life. I remember a wedding that did not at the time strike me as out of the ordinary. Over 200 people were invited from the countryside. The bride was as happy as a bride can be, and the bridegroom was accounted a fine man. There was plenty to eat and drink, and altogether it was one of the best weddings I have ever seen. When the time came for the pair to go away, the groom could not be found. It was afterward discovered that he had gone off to a horse sale he had forgotten about.

Many of my country boys are myself. One of the things I remember was being found by an old farmer in his quince tree. I suppose I was drawing a quince from life. Fruit-stealing excursions were

by no means unknown to me. I was small and was especially chosen by a marauding gang of bigger boys to push through the barbed wire and sneak into orchards. I always was left with the worst of the fruit and torn pants. There was no escape from these fruit Fagins. Some of my memories are only funny to myself, but I have used them in my drawings. I distinctly remember the crowd outside the pub one summer day. Some were sitting on the horse rail in front, and suddenly one of the most dignified cockies in the district went over backward in a spectacular buster. It was my lesson on the fun that lies in puncturing dignity.

The greatest character in the town was old Joe Jewell, the bullocky. He had a great fund of stories, most of them requiring editing. When he pulled into the yard at the station, he would then go to his locker and produce a tin of jam and a loaf. He would boil the billy in the yard until the tea was like treacle. Then he would consume the lot—all but the jam tin. He would put the whole of the jam, over an inch thick, on two or three slices of bread. He was a master of picturesque language. His description of his team's descent of a steep pinch on the Mount Gambier road: "Steep!" he told us. "By cripes, it was that steep the blinkin' tails of the bullocks got tangled up with their horns." There was never yet a character I needed for my bush drawings that Kaniva did not supply, at the expense of a slight effort of memory. I hope they don't mind!