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THE FIRE AT ROSS'S FARM.pdf

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The Fire at Ross’s Farm

A One-Act Play

By

Keith Clouten

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INTRODUCTION

Most Christmas stories are set in the northern hemisphere where falling snow, twinkling lights, cozy fires, and sleigh bells are an integral part of the scene and the story itself. But Christmas is also celebrated south of the equator in lands where December brings long hours of daylight, searing summer temperatures, thunderstorms, and forest fires. Such is Christmas in many parts of Australia.

“The Fire at Ross’s Farm” takes its story from a narrative poem of the same title by one of Australia’s best known and loved poets of the 19th century, Henry Lawson. It is the simple and perhaps typical story of two families in conflict over possession of farm land in the Australian interior. George Johnson typifies the squatter who followed closely on the heels of the explorer and pioneered the western grazing frontier by clearing and stocking large tracts of land with sheep and cattle. Sandy Ross, on the other hand, represents the struggling selector who came later with legal title to small portions of the land loosely occupied by the usually wealthy and influential squatters. Too frequently, the result was conflict. The play embellishes Lawson’s narrative poem with additional themes and characters.

A subplot for the play is taken from another of Lawson’s poems, “The Squatter, Three Cornstalks, and the Well”. Both poems were composed in 1890, and are included in several collections of Australian poetry. ¹

Keith Clouten

1  In the Days When the World Was Wide: Poetical Works of Henry Lawson. (Australian Classics series).
### GLOSSARY OF SOME AUSTRALIAN WORDS & PHRASES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arvo</td>
<td>Afternoon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Billabong</td>
<td>A waterhole in the outback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bloke</td>
<td>Man; equivalent of AGuy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buckley=s Chance</td>
<td>Little chance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bushfire</td>
<td>Forest or scrub wildfire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chap</td>
<td>Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chuck it in</td>
<td>Give up; abandon the effort</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fair Dinkum?</td>
<td>Is that really true?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give it a miss</td>
<td>Let the opportunity slip by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodfella</td>
<td>A helpful Australian native male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gum</td>
<td>Generic name for Australian eucalyptus tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A=Let=s hear it for (Bill)@</td>
<td>OK, let’s hear it for (Bill)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lousy</td>
<td>Grossly or badly behaved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mate</td>
<td>Good guy, Friend or Pal (male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pound (Currency)</td>
<td>Old unit of Australian currency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quid</td>
<td>Common expression for “pound” (Currency)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right-o</td>
<td>OK, let’s do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selector</td>
<td>Pioneer farmer who purchased his land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She-Oak</td>
<td>Species of tree, with needles rather than leaves</td>
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<tr>
<td>“She’ll be right”</td>
<td>No need to worry, everything will be fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A=Shoot through@</td>
<td>Get away quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southerly buster</td>
<td>Summer windstorm from the south</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squatter</td>
<td>A pioneer settler, occupying land without legal title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockman</td>
<td>Australian equivalent of a cowboy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swaggie, Swagman</td>
<td>Itinerant laborer, Hobo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea</td>
<td>Common term for the evening meal, or supper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucker</td>
<td>Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up with the kookaburrras</td>
<td>Rising early, with the birds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walkabout</td>
<td>A journey on foot by a native Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyalong</td>
<td>The name of a small rural town in western New South Wales</td>
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Characters in the Play

Sandy Ross   Farmer
Sally Ross   Sandy’s Wife
Jenny Ross   18-year-old daughter of Sandy and Sally
George Johnson   Squatter
Robert Johnson   20-year-old son of George
Connie   George =s Housekeeper
Mickey   Native Australian
Ben   Itinerant Tramp
Jake   Itinerant Tramp
Tom   Itinerant Tramp
Jack   Johnson’s Head Stockman
Unnamed, no speaking parts   Three Stockmen
SYNOPSIS

Sandy Ross is a struggling, small farmer in remote, western New South Wales, during the 1890s. His livelihood is threatened by a severe summer drought and likely failure of the wheat harvest, his only source of income. Sandy’s situation is exacerbated by an ongoing conflict with his nearest neighbor, George Johnson, a wealthy squatter, who is angered by Sandy’s ownership of some of the best land in the area. Adding complexity to the feud is a love affair between young Robert Johnson and Jenny Ross.

As Christmas approaches, the conflict is intensified with arrival of three itinerant laborers who set out to deceive the squatter and convince Sandy that Johnson has poisoned his farm dog, Toby. Their evil plans are foiled by the quiet intervention of a native tracker, Mickey.

The play climaxes with the coming of a bushfire on Christmas Eve. It appears that Ross will lose everything, but then something entirely unexpected happens.
THE FIRE AT ROSS’S FARM

SCENE ONE

It is four days before Christmas, sometime in the 1890s, at the farm of Sandy and Sally Ross in western New South Wales, Australia. The scene is the simple, frugally furnished interior of their small cottage. On the wall facing the audience is a large open window, with an old sofa in front of it. At right is a door to the outside, and to the left is a table with four chairs. The scene opens with Sally Ross seated at the table, reading a letter just received from her mother in England.

Sally: (Reading) “Autumn has arrived here in England, with trees in red and gold. By the time this letter reached you in Australia, I suppose you will be thinking about Christmas. I can’t imagine the kind of weather you will have at Christmastime. I’m sure you won’t have snow and the bright, red holly berries.” (Looks up) You’re right about that, Mum. We’ll be celebrating this Christmas with a heat-wave and dust. It was already a yellow sky when I got up this morning. We need rain so much. (The door opens, and Jenny comes in with some pieces of mistletoe.) What have you got there, Jenny?

Jenny: Some mistletoe. I took it from one of the old red gums down near the billabong. Had to climb up onto one of the big limbs to reach it. (Drops the mistletoe on the table). It’s only four days to Christmas, Mum, and we need something to make it look like Christmas, don’t you think? (Pause) What are you reading?

Sally: It’s a letter from grandma, dear. One of the stockmen from Smith’s farm saw it in the post office at Wyalong, waiting to be picked up, so he stopped by on his ride home. (Looks at mistletoe) Grandma always decorated her fireplace with red holly berries. But mistletoe will do for us here. Perhaps we can make some sort of wreath and hang it over by the door.

Jenny: I like that idea. And then we stand under the mistletoe and make a wish. Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do? (Holds mistletoe over her mother’s head). If you were allowed one wish for Christmas, what would it be?

Sally: I’ll bet you know what my wish will be – an end to this drought. There’s nothing we need more than some good, soaking rain. You’ve just been over by the billabong. You know how dry it is there. The grass there should be lush and green. But it’s all brown. Our poor wheat out there is standing in dust. There’ll be no harvest if we don’t get rain real soon.

Jenny: I’d love the smell of rain. The sound of it drumming on our tin roof.
Sally: Yes, dear, my Christmas wish is for a good rain storm. That would be Dad’s wish too.

Jenny: I heard Dad say we should give Christmas a miss this year.

Sally: Dad’s feeling very discouraged. But even if we can’t afford to buy presents, we can still make Christmas a bit special for ourselves, can’t we?

Jenny: Well, I’m not expecting anything for Christmas, Mum. You know that. (Suddenly brightens) But anyway, I already have my Christmas present this year. (Picks up a red dress from nearby sideboard). You’ve been altering this dress for me, haven’t you? It used to look lovely on you. Can I try it on?

Sally: Of course, dear. (Jenny leaves at left, with dress. Sally begins arranging the mistletoe into a wreath. Talks to herself). We’ve got to think of something we can do, or make, for Christmas. Only four days away. Would be nice if we could make a trip to Williamson’s shop in Wyalong. He would have some nice things on sale – but we couldn’t afford to buy them anyway. Never mind, we’ll just have to make our own Christmas. (Jenny reappears, wearing the red dress, stands for her mother to see). It looks good on you.

Jenny: (Takes a mirror and looks at herself) Thank you, Mum. (Gives mother a kiss) You won’t mind if I go out for a while this afternoon? I’m expecting Robert might come over. If he does, we might go riding together.

Sally: (Continues working with mistletoe) You would enjoy that, I know. Yes, that will be all right, dear.

Jenny: I’m hoping he will come. (Pause) But you won’t tell ...

Sally: I won’t breathe a word to Dad. If he comes in and asks where you are, I’ll just tell him you’ve ridden over to Widow McCree’s place, to take her some eggs. Dad won’t know you’re out with Robert.

Jenny: (Sighs) You know, Mum, it’s just the same between Robert and his father. Robert is not supposed to see me. Why are our fathers so mad at each other all the time?

Sally: (Both now sitting at the table) Jenny, dear, you’ve got to remember that the squatters, like George Johnson – Robert’s father – they were here a long time before anyone else. It was the squatters who opened up this part of our country. They were the first people to settle out here in the west. The village of Wyalong wasn’t there then. (Sighs) I s’pose we should be thankful the squatters came and
did the hard yukka of opening up the land – they cleared the scrub, made the first tracks out here. Squatters were the pioneers.

Jenny: But I don’t understand what they have against us. Is it just because we are the new chums in the district?

Sally: It’s more than that, dear. You see, the land all around here was not surveyed when George Johnson came out. That was about twenty-five years ago. He just occupied all this countryside. His sheep and cattle roamed across nearly 100,000 acres. Some cattle runs covered 200 square miles.

Jenny: That’s a lot of land!

Sally: Yes, it is. But nothing happened ’til about four years ago. That’s when small selectors—like us—came out here to the west. We arrived with legal title to some of Johnson’s best land. That’s the way it happened. So, it’s no wonder the squatters get upset with small settlers, like us wheat farmers.

Jenny: That’s why Mr. Johnson is so bitter towards us?

Sally: It’s a big part of it, dear. George Johnson never owned the six hundred and forty acres that Dad selected, but he used to run his sheep all over it. When Dad arrived three years ago and showed him the ownership papers, it was like all hell broke loose.

Jenny: But it takes two to quarrel, and I think Dad is just as nasty to Mr. Johnson as he is to us.

Sally: *(Sighs deeply)* Yes, I know.

*(Sally takes the wreath and hangs it high on the wall to the right of the window. Jenny stands below it.)*

Jenny: My Christmas wish is for an end to this stupid quarrel, then we can all get along together. I’d like that even more than a rain storm. *(Pause)* I wonder what Mrs. Johnson was like, when she was alive. Robert never talks about his mother.

Sally: We never got to meet her. She died on Christmas Day three years ago, just after we moved here. I’ve met his housekeeper, Connie. She’s a very nice person.

*(Sandy Ross enters the house.)*

Sandy: We got a sick dog.
Sally: Oh, which one?

Sandy: Toby. He’s quite sick. Makes us wonder if he might have been poisoned. What did we do with that box of medicines the vet gave us?

Sally: We don’t want to lose Toby. I think I know where the medicine box is in the shed. I’ll come with you.

(Sandy and Sally leave together. Jenny sits quietly at the table, reading grandma’s letter. Soon there is a tapping at the window. Jenny gets up, sees Robert, and signals.)

Jenny: You can come in. There’s no one else here. They’ll be gone for a while.

Robert: (Jumps in through the open window.) Yeah. I watched your folks go out.

Jenny: They’ve gone out to the shed. We’ve got a sick dog – Toby. He is always with Dad around the farm. Mum and Dad have gone to give him some medicine.

Robert: I’m sorry to hear that. You don’t want to lose any of your dogs. (The two sit together on the sofa.)

Jenny: We’ve only got two now. Dad is afraid that someone might have left some poison that Toby ate.

Robert: Heck! Living out here in the scrub, who would come and do a thing like that?

Jenny: Dad didn’t say much. (Pause) But you can guess who he’d blame for it.

Robert: My Pa, of course. But there’s no reason on earth Pa would want to do that. He just wants to keep out of your way. Cripes! Why do our fathers behave like a couple of scrapping tomcats!

Jenny: I don’t know. It just goes on and on.

Robert: Always blaming each other every time something bad happens.

Jenny: I think it started three years ago when Dad fenced off the billabong, so your father’s sheep wouldn’t have access to the water. That was a pretty mean thing to do.

Robert: Oh, well, he had a legal right to do that on his own property, of course. My Pa thinks all small selectors are a curse. So, whenever Pa finds a gate left open, he blames one of the farmers—usually your father, because you’re our closest
neighbors. I wish we could just bang their heads together and tell them to be decent to each other. *(Looks around, sees mistletoe wreath.*) You’ve got mistletoe for Christmas.

Jenny: Oh, just a few pieces I got from an old red gum.

Robert: That’s OK. That’s as good as anybody has out here in the bush. Unless you live in England or somewhere where they have pine trees and holly.

Jenny: Yes, I’ve just been reading a letter from my grandma. She talks about Christmas in England. They have snow, and travel around on sleighs. And they gather round the fireplace and sing carols. Seems funny, doesn’t it? I can’t imagine it.

Robert: *(Wistfully)* When I was a little kid we used to have a Christmas tree in our parlor. Usually just a branch cut from a she oak. But we haven’t celebrated Christmas since Ma died three years ago. Pa won’t allow a tree, or presents, or even Christmas dinner.

Jenny: Really? Oh, Rob, that’s awful. *(slowly)* I had no idea it was like that. Even if we don’t have money to buy presents, like this year, we always put up something for decoration. Even if it’s just a branch from an old gum tree. And Mum always cooks something special for dinner.

Robert: Anything green and alive looks nice. *(Looks out the window.)* Everything around here is so dead and brown. Do we ever need rain!

Jenny: I heard Dad say the wheat is finished if it doesn’t rain by Christmas.

Robert: I’m sure he’s right. How’s your water situation?

Jenny: Our house tank would be empty, except Dad insisted on leaving enough water in it, just for drinking. For everything else, we take the horse and cart down to the billabong and fill a couple of big drums. You don’t want to drink billabong water, but it’s OK for everything else. We also have a well, but it’s down to mud.

Robert: Most of our wells are dry too. Pa went to Wyalong this morning, for a couple of days. He knows a bloke there who has some sort of drilling equipment. If he can drill a deep well for us, it will relieve our water problem. *(Pause)* Talking about wells, though, three swagmen stopped at our place yesterday, looking for some work for cash, or tucker. Pa gave them a job, cleaning out an old well that we haven’t used for years. *(Another pause. Looks at Jenny’s dress.)* Mm. You look swell today, Jenny. Is that a new dress?
Jenny: No, it’s really an old one of Mum’s that she put away because it was too small for her. But she did some work on it, and now it fits me quite well. I’m glad you like it. (Brightly) Hey, Rob, come and stand by the mistletoe wreath, and make your Christmas wish. That’s what you’re supposed to do.

Robert: (Both stand up.) I could make my wish, but right now it has Buckley’s chance of coming true. (Sarcastic laugh.)

Jenny: Why, Rob?

Robert: Can’t you guess what I’m wishing, Jenny? (She looks out the window and interrupts)

Jenny: They’re coming! Quick! Get behind the sofa.

(Robert gets down behind the sofa where he remains hidden. Sandy and Sally enter.)

Jenny: How is Toby?

Sandy: Toby’s dead. Our dog’s been poisoned!

Sally: We found a piece of bread in the shed. It smelled of arsenic or something.

Jenny: That’s terrible. He was a lovely dog.

Sandy: (Bitter) And I bet I know who did it! George Johnson, the scumbag!

Sally: (Trying to calm him) Now, dear, we don’t know who it was.

Sandy: He’s the only one around the place who would even think of doing such a thing. Him, or his lousy son, Robert.

Jenny: (Upset) No, Dad! Not Robert.

Sandy: Don’t you defend him! I don’t want to ever see that kid around this place. (Flops onto sofa, discouraged.) How much more can a man take? Six months of drought, dust storms, no harvest this year unless we get rain, and now I’ve lost my working dog. (Pause) I reckon we ought to pack up and move back to Sydney.

Sally: We’ll make it through, dear. You wouldn’t get anything for the place now anyway. (Pause) Oh, but look at the time. It’s five o’clock already. Jenny will come and help me get tea ready, won’t you dear?
(Jenny looks anxiously towards sofa, then exits to kitchen at left, with Sally. Soon there is a knock at the door. Sandy gets up, opens door, and invites three swagmen to come in – Ben, Jake, and Tom. Tom is several cents short of a dollar, and says nothing except an occasional “yeah” after Ben or Jake have said something. They stand in a row inside the door.)

Sandy: Who are you blokes?

Ben: I’m Ben, an’ these is Jake and Tom. We just come into the district a couple days ago, to find some work. (yeah)

Sandy: And I’m Sandy Ross. You’re swaggies, eh? Well, sorry, I’ve got no jobs for anyone.

Ben: We’re not askin’ for work, Mr. Ross. George Johnson ‘as hired us to do a job for ‘im. (yeah)

Sandy: George Johnson is a rascal. I’d be careful of him if I was you.

Ben: It’s OK, mate, we know quite a lot about ‘im, don’t we, boys? (yeah)

Jake: We ‘eard the old man’s bin layin’ poison baits round some of the farms.

Sandy: You heard that? Hmm. That’s interesting.

Jake: So we just come by to warn you, to keep an eye on your animals. (yeah)

Sandy: Thanks, mate, but it’s a bit late.

Ben: Meanin’?

Sandy: One of my dogs died less than an hour ago. Poisoned.

(The three exchange knowing glances.)

Jake: Sorry to hear that, Mr. Ross.

Ben: George Johnson ought to be shot for that. (yeah)

Sandy: I’d like to shoot him myself! (Pause) And you blokes are doing a job for him?

Ben: Yeah. A contract job. You take anything when you’re desperate for tucker.

Jake: Not much work around, on account of the drought. (yeah)
Sandy: I thought the squatter had enough men of his own, without hiring extra help.

Ben: Johnson’s stockmen are away at his outstation ‘til Christmas.

Jake: So, we’re cleanin’ out a well for ‘im. (yeah)

Sandy: Cleaning out a well?

Jake: Yeah. It’s an old well, full of muck and stuff.

Ben: Well, anyway, he wants this partic’lar one cleaned out. An’ in that connection, sir, we got a proposal to make.

Jake: *(Confidentially)* It also gives you a chance to git even with Johnson, for what he done to you. An’ make a bit of money. (yeah)

Sandy: What’s the deal, then?

Ben: Well, p’raps you ‘ave a horse and cart we could hire from now till Christmas?

Sandy: Hmm. I might. What do you need a horse and cart for?

Ben: It’s like this, mate. Johnson ‘as agreed to pay us a set amount for each day it takes us to clean out the well. When we ‘ad a close look at it, we reckoned the three of us could do the job in a day an’ a half.

Jake: Yeah. But with three more workin’ days to Christmas, we’d like to make the job last for four days. (yeah)

Sandy: So?

Ben: So we gits an idea. We haul dirt out of the well durin’ each day, then after it gits dark each evenin’ we’ll fetch a load o’ sand from the dry creek bed, an’ tip it down the well. Then next day we’ll haul it up again.

Jake: That’ll make the job last out ‘til Christmas. An’ Johnson is away in Wyalong ‘til then, so he’ll never know what we done.

Ben: Smart idea, don’t you think? (yeah) An’ see, it gives you a chance to git even with Johnson. (yeah)

Jake: We’ll have the horse and cart back to you on Christmas Eve.
Ben: Listen, mate, we pay you two quid for hire of the horse an’ cart. We’ll give you the cash on Christmas Eve, after Johnson settles with us. What do you reckon?

Sandy: *(Surprised)* You’ll pay me two pounds for the hire of a horse and cart? *(Looks sideways, quietly)* That’s pretty generous. I know the squatter’s rollin’ in dough, but I didn’t know he was that free with his money?

Ben: Well, if Johnson’s throwin’ money round, we’ll be there to catch it. *(yeah)*

Sandy: Two pounds, on Christmas Eve. Yes, I rather like that idea. *(laughs)* Right-o, you can count me in on the scheme.

Ben: *(Puts out his hand)* Then it’s a deal?

Sandy: *(Shakes hands)* It’s a deal, mate. When do you want to pick up the cart?

Ben: We’d like it first thing tomorra morning.

Sandy: I’m an early riser, up with the kookaburras. I’ll have the horse and cart ready for you.

Ben: We thank you, Mr. Ross. But you won’t breathe a word to anyone about it, OK? If Johnson got wind …

Sandy: She’ll be right, mate. You can depend on me.

*(Sandy goes outside with the men. Robert gets up from behind the sofa, looks around, then quickly climbs out of the window. Moments later, Sandy returns to the room, stands a moment, chuckling to himself. Sally and Jenny come in from the kitchen. Sally begins setting the table. Jenny steals a glance behind the sofa and is surprised to notice Robert is not there.)*

Sally: We’ll soon have tea ready, dear. Who was it came to see you?

Sandy: Oh, a couple of blokes doin’ some contract work in the district. *(Pause)* I’m renting them our horse and cart for the next few days. A chance to bring in a little cash – two pounds at Christmas Eve. We can do with that right now, can’t we? *(Grabs Sally around the waist and swings her around.)*

Sally: Two pounds for the hire! That’s wonderful, dear. We could have a lovely Christmas with that.

Sandy: *(Looks up at the mistletoe)* OK, I’m wishing for a real Christmas dinner, with turkey and plum pudding. *(laughs)*
Sally: What sort of work are the men doing?

Sandy: Oh ... they’re carting some stuff ... for one of the farmers down the track.

(The three sit at the table to eat. Another knock at the door.)

Sandy: Strike! Is this a boarding house or something? (Goes to door, returns with an aborigine, Mickey.) Come in, Mickey. I might’ve known it’d be you. You know when to come, don’t you? When there’s tucker around. Sit down.

Mickey: Thanks, boss. Hello, Missus. Hello, Miss Jenny.

Sally: We haven’t seen you for quite a while, Mickey.

Mickey: Yes, Missus.

Sandy: So what’s up, old fella? What you been doing?

Mickey: I reckon two wombats want to make their nest under your house.

Sally: I guess it would be cool under there for them. You saw their tracks, right? I bet you’re the best tracker in all Australia, Mickey.

Mickey: (Iignores comment) I bin walkabout down river, boss.

Sandy: I was hoping you’d been doing a rain dance, or something. That’s what we need right now. Rain. Lots of it.

Mickey: No rain yet I think, boss. Bushfires, maybe.

Sally: (Alarmed) Bushfires! Oh, don’t tell us that, Mickey.

Sandy: Bushfires are just what we don’t want now. Everything’s tinder dry. If a fire starts around here in these conditions, we’re finished.

Jenny: If there were fires around, we would see or smell some smoke, wouldn’t we?

Mickey: No fires yet, Miss. In two, maybe three days.

Sandy: What makes you think that, Mickey?

Sally: He’s just trying to scare us, aren’t you, Mickey?
Mickey: No, Missus. I bin look at the moon last night, hear the wind singing. Some big fires coming down from the north. Here soon I think.

Sally: Please, God, no.

Sandy: You’d better stop that moon-gazing, Mickey. We don’t want fires this Christmas. We’re already in big trouble with the drought, the wheat harvest seems doomed, and today my dog was poisoned. I can’t take much more.

Mickey: Sorry ’bout your dog, boss. Bad men bin around your place.

Sandy: Well, one bad man, perhaps.

Mickey: No, boss. Three bad men, I think. I see tracks of three men coming into your place.

Sandy: *(Alarmed)* Tracks? Whose tracks?

Mickey: Don’t know who, boss. But I seen fresh tracks of men goin’ to your shed. Last night, I think. I reckon bad men bin around your place. *(Sandy, upset, puts hands to head.)*

Jenny: Who could they be?

Sally: Whoever they are, I hope they’re caught and brought to justice. *(Long pause)*

Mickey: *(Gets up)* Must be goin’ now, boss. Thanks, Missus, and Miss Jenny.

*(Sandy gets up and sees Mickey out the door. Sally and Jenny remove items from the table and exit to the kitchen)*

Sandy: *(Clearly upset by all this information. Stands for a few moments, shaking his head.)* Three men, he says. So, who poisoned my dog? I think I know. Those three swaggies were trying to frame George Johnson as the culprit. I’ve been made a fool. Well, my horse and cart’s not going anywhere, with anyone! *(He flops down on the sofa, with hands to head.)*

Sally: *(Comes in, observes Sandy, comes and sits by him, her hand on his shoulder.)* My poor man. It hasn’t been a good day, has it? The drought ... losing Toby ... now the threat of bushfires. *(Pause)* But buck up, dear, there’s a bright spot. You’ll be getting two pounds for the horse and cart. We can have that Christmas dinner you wished for.

*(Sandy groans).* *(Curtain)*
SCENE TWO

It is early afternoon of Christmas Eve at the squatter’s homestead. The scene is the office of the squatter. As the scene opens, George Johnson is sitting at his desk, facing the audience, working on his year-end accounts. There are two other chairs in the room, left of the desk. George’s house-keeper, Connie, enters from the left.

Connie: I know you’re busy, George, but do you have a couple of minutes?

George: Come in, Connie. Make yourself comfortable. I’m working on our year-end accounts, but I need a break from the books. (She sits; George comes from behind his desk, but sits on the side of his desk.)

Connie: This has been a tough year, what with the drought and other things. And you’ve just got home, after three days at Wyalong. I shouldn’t be interrupting you.

George: That’s OK. I’ve almost finished doing the accounts. In spite of the drought, it hasn’t been a bad year. Mind you, we had to move most of the sheep ten miles away to our out-station, for grass. They’ve had a couple of good rainstorms there that we missed out on.

Connie: It’s good to see the three young stockmen back for Christmas. While you were away, we did some cleaning of their living quarters behind the shearing shed. I don’t think the boys clean their place very often.

George: Nice of you to do that, Connie.

Connie: Well, it was pretty quiet around here while you and they were away, as Jack, your head stockman, will tell you. (Pause) George, I want to talk to you about something that’s been on my mind for quite a while. You know today is Christmas Eve.

George: And a stinking hot one, if I may say so. You can smell the smoke from the fires. They’re burning in the hills just north of here. But tell me what’s on your mind.

Connie: Well, tomorrow is Christmas, and I’m thinking with the men back and everything, how nice it would be to make it special by having a real good Christmas dinner, like we used to. I can look after all the cooking and everything – you know I love doing that – and it would ... well, it would be a bit like old times, you know. I’d love to do it.

George: (Frowns, pauses) I understand what you’re saying, Connie. Since Phyllis died – three years ago – I haven’t felt like celebrating Christmas. You know that.
Connie: I know that, George, and I’ve respected your wishes, even though I’ve so much wanted to make Christmas a bit special ... special for the stockmen who work for you – they are away from their families, and it must be awful lonely for them at Christmas, don’t you think? I know you pay them a good wage, but still ...

George: If I’m not generous with my workers, my name’s not Johnson. But I hear what you’re saying – it is a bit lonely for them at Christmas. 

Connie: It would be even more special for Robert, you know.

George: Hmm. Robert never talks to me about Christmas.

Connie: Oh, but he talks to me, George. Yes, he does. Just yesterday even. Told me how he remembers Christmas when his mother was alive; how much he misses those times. It would mean a lot to him, I know. It would mean a lot to all of us.

George: Hmm. (Connie’s remarks touch him. Sits back, folds his arms.) You’re right, Connie. I suppose I have been a wet blanket these last three years. (Pause) OK, I’ll go along with your suggestion of having Christmas dinner tomorrow. How many?

Connie: (counting on fingers) Well, there’s Jack, your head stockman, and his wife. Then the three young stockmen – the regulars – and Robert and yourself and me. That makes eight of us.

George: OK.

Connie: And what about the three swagmen you hired to clean out the well?

George: Oh, I’d nearly forgotten about them, with being away the last three days. Which reminds me, those blokes expected to finish the job today. They’ll be here later this arvo to collect their pay.

Connie: Well, being Christmas tomorrow, don’t you think it would be nice to invite them for dinner? That would make eleven of us.

George: You’ve got a kind heart, Connie. OK, let’s invite the poor beggars to our dinner.

Connie: Eleven’s an odd number though. It could be twelve. I can think of one other person.

George: Who is that?
Connie: (Stands, takes a deep breath, walks over to near George.) Now please don’t be upset with me, George. But I was thinking of Robert’s special friend, the Ross girl. She’s really a fine young lady.

George: (Frowns, looks away for a moment, then) Connie, let’s not have any member of the Ross family in my house. Robert knows my views on this very well. I don’t plan to invite any of that crowd to dinner. (Quieter) I’m sorry, but that’s how I feel about it.

Connie: I know your feelings, George, but I don’t think you understand much about Robert and Jenny Ross. Robert has been seeing her pretty often lately. They go riding together, and before you know it, they will be wanting to announce their engagement. Forgive me for saying it straight, George, but if you’re not going to accept Jenny Ross, you’re going to lose your son. (Connie moves back, George looks the other way) But I’m sorry I mentioned it … Eleven for dinner, then. (Pause) I’m glad we are going to celebrate Christmas this year. I’ll leave you to your work. Sorry for interrupting.

George: (She leaves, he stands, facing the audience.) I wonder where Robert is this afternoon, anyway? Seems he’s a bit quiet these days, maybe trying to avoid me. (Pause) Well, thanks to Connie, he won’t have an excuse to be anywhere else for Christmas dinner. (Returns to his desk, sits, thinking.)

(Mickey enters the room, taps on the wall to get George’s attention.)

George: (Looks up) It’s Mickey. Come in.

Mickey: Hello, boss. Plenty hot outside today.

George: Plenty hot in here too. What have you got to tell me, Mickey?

Mickey: Big fires, boss.

George: I know. I can smell it. Not coming this way though, unless the wind changes from the north-west.

Mickey: Some farmers might be in trouble tonight.

George: Yes, well, they will have to watch out for themselves. Have you seen anything of my well diggers this afternoon, Mickey?

Mickey: Not working today, boss. No one bin at the well today.

George: Probably too hot out there for the poor beggars. I hope they finished the job.
Mickey: You watch out for them fellers, boss.

George: What do you mean by that, Mickey?

Mickey: I seen the pile of stuff they took from the well. Too much, I think.

George: I’ve been too busy to go look, but Jack was probably there this morning. He will give me a report.

Mickey: No water in that well, mister. Dry as kangaroo bones.

George: Yes, but as it turns out, we’re not going to need that well anymore. (Pause) But what were you trying to tell me about the well diggers?

Mickey: Just watch out, boss. They take out too much dirt.

George: (Frowns) Take out too much dirt? I don’t know what you mean, Mickey.

Mickey: Look, boss. I think they take more dirt than was in the well. Maybe you ask ‘em some time.

George: More dirt than was in the well? (Confused) OK, Mickey, maybe I will ask them.

Mickey: Your horse and dray bin there too. (Pause, while George looks even more confused) Anyway, I might go now. Christmas tomorra, boss.

George: Yes, Christmas tomorrow. Have you been a goodfella, Mickey?

Mickey: Mickey is always a goodfella, boss.

(Both laugh as Mickey leaves.)

George: (Stands in contemplation a few moments) Yes, Mickey’s a goodfella. He also a smartfella. Trying to tell me something about those well diggers. (Bewildered) Pause) Connie! (She comes to the door.) Let’s add one more for dinner tomorrow. I think we should include Mickey.

Connie: I think that’s a real nice idea. Everybody likes Mickey. So it’s twelve after all.

George: Have you seen Jack around? I need to talk to him.

Connie: Jack just came in. He’s waiting to talk to you.
George: Send him in. Thanks, Connie.

(After a few seconds, Jack comes into the office. They sit on the two chairs in the room, facing each other.)

Jack: It’s good to see you back, sir. You had a successful trip?

George: Yes, I’ll tell you about that in a minute. It’s been pretty quiet here, I guess.

Jack: Yes. The boys just got back from the outstation yesterday, about nightfall. They’ve been busy polishing their saddles this morning. I reckon they’re glad to be back. Said the huts at the outstation are in pretty bad shape. The boys slept outside on the ground.

George: That wouldn’t worry them.

Jack: They said the sheep are looking OK. Kangaroos are the main problem, coming in for the grass. The boys shot a few. (Laughs) I reckon they probably lived on roo stew while they were there.

George: Did they say anything about bushfires out there?

Jack: Not out there. A different story here, though. Mickey tells me the wind may blow the fires close to the Ross farm tonight.

George: Humph. Too bad for them. I’d bless the fire if it would clear selectors from my run.

Jack: I know you feel that way, sir. But you have to admit that times are changing. I reckon we have to move with the times and adjust.

George: (Chooses to ignore) Well, anyway, while I was in Wyalong, I got to talk to old Bob, the bore maker. He promised me that in the New Year he will come and put down a bore for us, a deep well. That will mean the end of water shortages for us.

Jack: Hey, that’s great news! With the tanks for house use, we won’t need those shallow wells anymore. I reckon you might even be able to sell water to some of the farmers around.

George: That’s not my plan. (Pause) What can you tell me about our three well diggers? Mickey was trying to tell me something about them, but it didn’t make sense.
Jack: I’ve got quite a story to tell you about those diggers. What a lousy bunch! I let them sleep each night in the empty cottage, and my missus gave them some tucker every morning. I reckon they cooked with a campfire near their job. I rarely saw them. (Pause) Mickey is pretty observant, though, so what he tells you is probably true. Did he say anything about seeing wheel tracks near the well?

George: Yes, he did. What did he mean by that?

Jack: He showed me the tracks. And horse prints. So I asked one of the men, Ben, to explain.

George: What did he tell you?

Jack: Well, this was his story. He tried to tell me that sometime during each night, Sandy Ross came over with a cart full of river sand and heaved it down the well, so the boys had to spend all next day digging it out.

George: (Shocked) What!

Jack: But you want to hear the real story?

(George is not listening because Robert bursts into the room at that moment.)

George: Something the matter, son?

Robert: Sorry to barge in. It’s the fire!

George: Has the wind changed direction?

Robert: No, no, but the wind has driven it down to the flats. It’s close to Ross’s farm. Pa, can you spare at least some of the men? Mr. Ross’s wheat is all he’s got. If he loses the wheat, he’s finished, wiped out. He needs help right away. (Pause) Please, Pa?

George: (Anger) I’m sorry, my boy, but I’m not going to help that rascal! I’ve just been hearing about him. Sandy Ross is a scoundrel! Let the fire burn him out! Good riddance, I’d say.

Robert: (Stunned) Pa!

George: Go and join your friends if you like, but none of my men are going fire-fighting at Ross=s farm! That’s final!
Robert: *(Deeply hurt, speaks quietly)* All right, I’ll go by myself. *(Turns to leave, then something else)* There’s one thing, though. You might want to ask your well diggers why they had to “borrow” one of your horses and the dray the last couple of nights ... without anyone’s permission! And why it took them four days to clean out a well that could have been done in one and a half! *(Strides out the door, which bangs behind him.)*

*(Curtain)*

**SCENE THREE**

*About ten o’clock the night of Christmas Eve. The interior of Ross’s house, as in scene one, but in reduced lighting. A solitary candle is burning in the room. Through the closed window is seen the glow of a fire. Sally stands near the window, watching the fire every few moments.*

Sally: *(Discouraged)* Christmas Eve, and bushfires. What did we do to deserve this? Looks like we’re going to lose the wheat. That means no income. Then what? Sandy’s right when he says we should just abandon this place and move back to Sydney. Why did we ever come to this God-forsaken place?

*(Looks upward)* God, where are you tonight? We’re desperate for your help, God. *(Pause)* Mum, you taught me to pray when I was a little girl back in England. But I’ve given you up, God. But we need your help right now, please. Help us, please.

*(The door opens, and Jenny comes in; wipes her forehead of sweat.)*

Sally: *(Anxiously)* What’s happening out there? Are you OK? Is Dad all right?

Jenny: Phew! It’s hot and smoky out there. I’m all right, but Dad is pretty near exhausted. The fire’s burning in the low scrub just this side of the wheat field. That’s where Dad and Robert are, trying to put out the flames with corn sacks. If a big gust of wind comes, the wheat will be gone.

Sally: Oh, is Robert still out there with Dad? It was wonderful that he came to help. *(Looks at clock)* But that was three hours ago.

Jenny: Oh, yes, Robert is still there. The two of them have been slogging and sweating without a break since seven o’clock. I took a canteen of water to them. Dad told me to come back inside, said there’s nothing I can do to help. I don’t think they’re stopping even to drink the water.
Sally: Those poor men. It’s after ten already. *(Pause, looks out window again)* I can’t see Dad, or Robert, can you? Even though the moon is bright, the smoke blots out everything.

Jenny: *(Looks through window)* I can see them. They’re bashing flames in the low scrub next to the wheat field.

Sally: Mercy! Please God, don’t let the fire get into our wheat. It will only take a strong gust of wind and the flames will roar through the wheat.

Jenny: And there’d be nothing left. *(Pause, then anxious)* Oh, look! Now there are flames in the grass over near the barn. That means the fire has jumped over the track.

Sally: Fire in two places! How can two men cope with that?

Jenny: They can’t.

Sally: Oh, I’m afraid for the barn. There’s a drum of kerosene in there. If the barn catches fire, there’ll be an explosion. God, please save us.

Jenny: If only the wind would quit. *(Pause, then excited)* Horses! I can hear horses somewhere.

Sally: Horses? Oh, I can hear horses too. But we can’t see anything. There’s too much smoke.

Jenny: I’ve got to find what’s happening. I’m going out again.

Sally: All right. But please be careful, dear. *(Jenny exits, Sally flops onto sofa, weary.)*

*(A scene break, representing one hour of time. The stage lighting fades to darkness except for a single candle burning. After a few seconds, a voice off stage: “One hour later”. Then the stage lighting returns as Jenny enters from outside.)*

Sally: Jenny! You’ve been gone a long time. It’s after eleven. What’s happening? Are the men all right?

Jenny: *(Excited)* Mum, the fire is out!

*Sally:* Truly? It’s out? But what about the wheat?

Jenny: The wheat was saved.
Sally: Oh, wonderful! *(She hugs Jenny)*

Jenny: *(Excited)* But, Mum, remember when we heard horses? You’ll never guess who the horsemen were! *(Pause, for effect)* Mr. Johnson and four of his men! *Can you believe that?* There were five men – five! They arrived just when Dad and Robert were ready to give up the fight, because the fire was burning in two different places.

Sally: Jenny, what are you telling me? You don’t mean the squatter? And his men? No, no, that can’t be true! I can’t believe what you’re telling me.

Jenny: *But, Mum, it’s true!* I didn’t believe it myself, at first. But it really was Mr. Johnson and four of his stockmen. They all arrived with corn sacks. They tied their horses and ran to the fire. By then it was almost into the wheat. When I went out, they were already smashing flames in every direction. Strong men, with lots of energy. It was amazing to watch them.

Sally: *(Astonished)* Really! How wonderful! So is the fire out, completely?

Jenny: Yes, Mum, the fire is out. And the wind has stopped.

Sally: So, where are the men now? Have they gone home? Where’s Dad? And Robert?

Jenny: The men were getting ready to leave, but Dad told them all to come in for a drink of water. They’ll be here pretty soon.

*(Sandy and Robert come in, their faces smudged with smoke. They are followed by the rest. The lighting is now illuminating the mistletoe wreath on the wall. Sandy comes over to left side of the room, near Sally and Jenny. The rest – George, Jack, and three young stockmen, stand over on the right, just inside the door. Robert comes to stand between the two groups – “us and them”. An uncomfortable few moments.)*

Sandy: *(Looks exhausted. Coughs nervously)* Er ... this is my wife, Sally, and our daughter, Jenny.

George: Glad to meet you, Mrs. Ross, and Jenny. Sandy asked us to come in for a few minutes.

Sally: I’m sorry, we don’t have chairs for you all. But we’ll get some water. *(Sally and Jenny exit to kitchen. Sandy flops wearily onto the sofa.)*

George: *(To Sandy)* I can see you’re pretty beat. It’s been a long, rough evening for you.
Jack: Lucky that the wind calmed down – about the time we arrived, I think.

George: There was some lightning a while ago. We might be in for a change of weather. A southerly buster perhaps.

Various Responses: Hope so ... Would be nice ... We’d like that.

Jack: Some cool air would be nice. But we’ve had so many of these lightning storms all summer, without a single drop of rain.

(Sally and Jenny re-enter with a flask of water and a tray of assorted cups. Not much said except “thanks” as they hand cups of water to everyone)

Sandy: (Offered water) No, give it to Robert. He was out there with me for hours.

Robert: No, you first.

(Sandy is nervous and silent, so Sally decides to say something.)

Sally: Sandy and me just want to thank you all for coming to save our place, don’t we, dear?

Sandy: (Gets up, coughs) That’s right. (Pause) Seems forever I was out there fighting the flames, on my own. But then I realized someone else was alongside me. Couldn’t tell who it was for a while. (Turns to Robert) You came, Robert, didn’t say a word, just grabbed a sack and started smashing flames with me. It was hot, hard work. (To the others) We thought we had lost the fight, then suddenly you all appeared. (Emotionally) Thanks, all of you, for coming. You saved my farm tonight. Thought we were going to lose our wheat, and the barn, and everything.

George: Perhaps we arrived in the nick of time, did we? (All agree. Slowly, with pauses) Well, I want to say something to you, Sandy, and your family. I’ve been a lousy neighbor to you people. My Phyllis died exactly three years ago this Christmas. That was just about the time you moved out here – and I took a lot of my sorrow and anger on you. That was wrong. In the last twenty-four hours, I’ve heard a lot of things that have changed me and my attitude towards you. Times have changed, and I’m going to be a good neighbor to you and everyone else.

Sandy: (Slowly, with emotion) Thanks. I hardly know what to say. But I suppose it takes two to fight, and I’ve acted rotten to you, and Robert, these last three years. I’m sorry for that. I’ve learned a few things in the last couple of days. Your comin’ over here tonight means more to me than I can tell you.

(A clock, out of sight, begins to strike twelve.)
George:  Hey, it’s midnight! So now it’s Christmas. *(Steps over to Sandy to shake hands).* Merry Christmas, Sandy, mate.

Sandy:  Merry Christmas, ... George. *(Suddenly the tension vanishes, everyone relaxes. Mickey comes in, un-noticed and stands just inside the door.)* And Merry Christmas to you, Robert. I reckon I would have chucked it in if you hadn’t been out there with me. It was tough for both of us. Thanks, mate. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve earned your way into my family.

Sally:  Oh yes, he certainly has.

Jack:  I reckon he did it for love. *(Laughter. Jenny moves over next to Robert – they are now standing together by the mistletoe wreath. Robert grasps Jenny’s hand.)*

George:  Look, they’re right under the mistletoe. *(More laughs)* I think that calls for a speech. *(Hear, hear!)*

Robert:  *(Overwhelmed)* For Jenny and me, this is the best thing that could ever happen to us. I think I’ll get my Christmas wish after all.

Jack:  Can we guess what that is?

Robert:  *(Coy)* Well ... I’d like to marry Jenny one day. *(They look into each other’s eyes. Applause)*

George:  Let’s have three cheers for Robert and Jenny. *(All join in three cheers)*

Sally:  *(Incredulous)* This is all so wonderful. I only wish we could invite you all back for dinner. But we’ve got nothing for Christmas this year, on account of the drought and everything.

George:  Thank you, Mrs. Ross. We understand, of course. *(Sudden idea)* But, hey! Listen now! How about you and Sandy and Jenny come over to our place in the morning and join all of us for Christmas dinner?

Robert:  *(Interrupts in shock)* Pa! You’re kidding!

George:  Oh, that’s right, son, I haven’t had a chance to tell you. Connie is preparing a real Christmas dinner, with turkey and plum pudding, and all the trimmings.

Robert:  Fair dinkum? Like is used to be?

George:  Like it used to be, son. *(Robert, excited, grabs Jenny)*
Sally: Mr. Johnson, it is really nice of you to invite us. But three extra people for dinner is more than your housekeeper is prepared for. So we ...

George: There’s no embarrassment, Mrs. Ross. As a matter of fact, three blokes who we originally counted in for dinner, have already left the district, in a big hurry – and good riddance! (Jack laughs) So there will be three empty places, just for you. What do you say?

Sandy: That’s real kind of you. Right-o, we’ll be honored to come, won’t we? I reckon this is one Christmas we will never forget. (Chorus of agreement)

Jack: There’s only one thing that could make it better. And you all know what that is.

Responses: Rain ... End to the drought.

George: I’m standing near the mistletoe, so I’ll make my wish for rain this Christmas. Every farmer’s wish would come true.

Mickey: (Comes forward) I think we all be lucky, boss. Big moon tonight, big rain coming today. (Excited expressions)

Sandy: Mickey, you’re not kidding us? Listen, if Mickey tells you something, you better believe it. I reckon it’s as good as a promise.

George: You mean it’s going to rain on our Christmas party, Mickey? That will make it the perfect Christmas. (Hear, hear) Let’s hear it for Mickey. (Three cheers)

Jack: I believe we can thank Mickey for quite a few things.

Sandy: Funny you should say that. I was thinking the same thing.

Mickey: I might be going now. (Moves to door)

All: Good night, Mickey.

George: See you at dinner, Mickey.

(Everyone exits, with “See you later”, “Good night”, “Merry Christmas”. After they leave, Jenny, Sally, and Sandy stand in that order from left to right, facing the audience. They share a sense of wonderment after the events of the past few hours. They each soliloquize).
Sally: Six hours ago – Christmas Eve – I thought we were going to lose everything we own.

Sandy: I was out there, fighting a fire, all by myself.

Jenny: Six hours ago, we had no one to help us.

Sally: Now, six hours later. My prayers have been answered. Our enemies have become our friends.

Jenny: (Looks at mistletoe) And all our wishes have come true.

Sandy: (Yawning) And it’s way past my bedtime. Goodnight.

(Curtain)