

The Drover's Wife

(retold by JB)

(Whenever I read The Drover's Wife by Henry Lawson I see my mother. My father was away a lot, working in the bush and my mother was left in a small cottage several miles out of town, with a half dozen young kids and she had to learn to fend for herself, just as the Drover's Wife did.)

Lawson's story is set in Australia in the 18th century. The drover is away with the sheep. He's been gone six months. His wife and four children are left alone. They live in a slab hut with a big bark kitchen. It is in the middle of the bush. Nineteen miles to the nearest house.

At night, when the children are asleep the drover's wife sometimes sits and stares at the door, hoping it will open; hoping he will walk in. Sometimes she sees his familiar figure standing there in the open doorway, but when she blinks away the tears the image has vanished.

One day the children spot a snake. The woman dashes from the kitchen, snatches her baby from the ground, holds it on her left hip and picks up a stick. Her eldest boy Tommy has his eye on the snake:

"There it goes—under the house."

The woman tries to tempt the snake out of its hiding place by placing saucers of milk near the wall. An hour later it still has not come out. By now it is early sunset. She can't take the children into the house because the snake could come up between the cracks in the slab floor. She carries several armfuls of firewood into the kitchen, and takes the children there. She makes them get on the table in the centre of the room.

She gives them dinner. Before it gets dark she goes into the house and snatches up some pillows and bedclothes—expecting to see or lay her hand on the snake at any moment. She shakes the bedding well. She makes a bed on the kitchen table for the children. Then she sits down beside to keep watch. She has brought the dog. Alligator, into the room Alligator hates snakes. The woman and the dog watch the corner where the snake is likely to come in. She has a green sapling club by her side.

The hours pass to midnight. The children are all asleep but she still sits there still with her candle. She passes the time sewing and reading.

Alligator lies at full length on the floor. His eyes are fixed on the partition. She knows that means the snake is there. There are large cracks in the wall, opening under the floor of the dwelling house. Several hours pass with the woman and the dog watching and waiting, the children sleeping. The fire is burning low.

Near daylight Alligator suddenly stirs. He draws himself a few inches nearer the partition. The hair on the back of his neck begins to bristle. His yellow eyes gleam. She lays her hand on the stick. A pair of small, bead-like eyes glistens at one of the holes in the partition. The black snake slithers out, about a foot, and moves its head up and down. The dog lies still, and the woman waits. If she strikes too soon and misses the snake will have a chance to attack her.

The black snake comes out a foot further. She lifts her stick. The reptile senses danger. It sticks its head in through the crack on the other side of the slab and tries to get his tail round after him.

Alligator springs. His jaws come together with a snap. He has the snake and tugs it partly out. The woman brings her club down with a thud. Alligator pulls again. He has the snake out now. It's five feet long.

Tommy wakes up, seizes his stick and tries to get out of bed; but his mother forces him back with a grip of iron. She brings her club down again. Thud, thud. Finally the snake is dead. The woman lifts the mangled reptile on the point of her stick, carries it to the fire, and throws it in then piles on the wood. The three of them stand and watch it burn; the woman, the boy and the dog.

After a few moments silence Tommy looks up at his mother. He sees the tears in her eyes and throws his arms round her neck.

"Mum," he says, "I'll never go droving."

She hugs him to her breast and kisses him. She will keep him to that promise. At least she won't have to sit through the long nights, waiting for *him* to walk through the door.