

The Bad Hat

It was a long time ago but I have never forgotten the occasion when I met my future husband's family for the first time. His parents thought we were too young to marry and it seemed to me that his whole family disapproved. All except Uncle Norrie, a striking figure with red hair and a matching handlebar moustache, who smiled and gave my hand a squeeze when we were introduced and made me feel that at least one of them was on our side.

Norrie was the youngest of three brothers and while his two older brothers were stalwart citizens who had done well in life, Norrie's career was more colourful, but less successful. As a young man he joined the RAF where he trained as a mechanic. He loved airforce life but left when he got married, even though the economic situation in Scotland was difficult at that time and he was frequently out of work.

As I got to know him better I found that he was a very talented musician. He played the piano by ear and had an excellent singing voice – to see and to hear him singing 'Home Sweet Home' would bring tears to your eyes.

We saw a lot of them at first but in 1969 we became 'Ten Pound Poms' leaving our families in the UK and coming to live in Australia. Back then communication wasn't as simple as it is now, but we wrote regularly and kept up with all the family news.

Everything went well with us and with our families back in the UK until one Christmas we got some dreadful news. Norrie had been sent to jail.

The family was shocked and it took a while before we found out what had happened but it was far worse than we could ever have imagined. Norrie had robbed a bank at gunpoint! And not just any bank, but his 'own' bank! The one where he went each week to deposit his paycheck and arrange his affairs.

Apparently he went to the Bank on his motor scooter and wearing a yellow hardhat and goggles as a disguise, he strode up to the counter, pulled out a gun and demanded £5,000. In spite of his disguise the bank teller recognised the moustache, but faced with the gun, handed him the money in £1 notes. Now £5,000 in single notes is too

bulky to fit in a pocket so Norrie demanded a container, then clutching a large shopping bag full of £1 notes he ran from the bank, jumped onto his motor scooter and took off. Unfortunately for Norrie, at the very first corner the heavy bag overbalanced him and he fell off. A passing workman ran over and helped him back on the bike, whereupon Norrie thanked him, reached into the bag and gave him a handful of £1 notes. He then went home, collected his wife and took her to lunch... at the pub opposite the bank he had just robbed, and it was there that the police found him and took him into custody.

The papers were full of it and the headline said it all 'The Bumbling Bank Robber' they called him.

At Norrie's trial the fact that the gun he used in his holdup was found to be a toy belonging to his son, did not mitigate his sentence. He got nine years and was sent to Barlinnie, Scotland's largest and most formidable prison where serious offenders were, and still are sent. The family was devastated, partly because they were sorry for him and partly because they were afraid their friends might find out they had a relative in jail! They said he was a 'Bad Hat' and they were ashamed of him.

His wife stood by him however and as time went on we heard how he was getting on. Apparently he was coping well and had even joined the Prison Pantomime Group. In those days Barlinnie held a traditional Christmas Pantomime every year which the public were able to attend. It was a very popular and well publicised event in Glasgow and Norrie with his musical ability was a welcome addition to the cast.

As time went by Norrie's interest in performing grew and he became something of a celebrity within the prison. Not only was he star of the Christmas pantomime, but he joined the The Barlinnie Band and took part in performances throughout the year to entertain his fellow inmates.

Nine years after going to prison Norrie was released. He had been an ideal prisoner causing no problems and he was popular with both his fellow prisoners and the staff. As a kindly gesture they let him out on the 1st December so that he could have his first Christmas for nine years back at home with his family.

Norrie spent a week with his family, then on the 7th of December, he went back to the bank which he had held up nine years before... and he held it up again! He wasn't in disguise this time and instead of a toy gun, he had a knife. Within hours he was caught and sent back to Barlinnie just in time for the final rehearsals for the annual Christmas Pantomime.

This time Norrie's prison sentence was in double figures and we heard no more about him. But I'm fairly certain that for the rest of his life he was a happy man. The prison community with its strict rules and regulations may have reminded him of the days when he was in the RAF, safe and secure with no money worries and no pressure. In Barlinnie he was a valued member of the community and to him it had become home!

I like to think that he starred in lots of Christmas pantomimes and I hope when they locked him up this time they threw away the key.