CHAPTER THREE

I

CHARTERS TOWERS was the home of Arthur Bauman, champion whip-plaiter of Queensland, kangaroo hunter and wood-carver. Day after day I spent with Bauman and his wife and their large family of children in their home on the outskirts of the town, enjoying the delicious meals Mrs. Bauman placed before me, watching Bauman at his whip-making and listening to his yarns.

The part played by the whip in cattle country is, of course, of vast importance. To quote Bauman, "The whip has a job, a life and a romance of its own." Most good stockmen pride themselves on the possession of a good whip, and spend many hours in learning to manipulate it in various ways.

The whip is not primarily an instrument of torture, be it known. It is not meant for the flogging of cattle. Only vicious beasts feel its sting, and unruly animals that persist in breaking out from the mob. In this latter case the stockman will run the beast down and administer a couple of punishing cuts "just to learn it".

The main function of the whip is to warn. At the crack of the stockman's whip from afar "experienced" cattle, in the mustering, will begin to move of their own accord towards the main watering place. The youngsters follow the oldsters.

In droving, the whip is used to induce a lagging beast to put a spurt on. In yarding up, especially if the stock resist, the whistle and crack of the whips accompany every move of the stockmen as they come up on the wings of the mob and press the leaders into the yards.

The many fine points in the making of a good whip are unexplainable; the process is creative and must be watched for understanding. The finished product is an artistic achievement, with no resemblance to the "four-strand flogger", as the ordinary whip made by an amateur is called.

In the machine-made whip the top length, near the handle, is almost all of like thickness. Bauman's whips had six inches of a tapering rise from the handle and then a beautiful tapering fall. It is this tapering, the secret of its perfection, that makes the difference between simple plaiting, by machine or by hand, and fine handicraft work. Perfect tapering imparts to the whip a good "falling" quality; in proportion as the tapering is imperfect the whip will tend to "kick", to act mo[illegible] like a rope.

Except on spe[illegible] ostly dealt in were

his twelve-strand stockwhip, a plain serviceable whip with no fancy plaiting, and his "special", in which sixteen strands were woven into several fancy plaits.

For the belly of the whip, in itself a four-strand whip round which the instrument proper was plaited, Bauman used the skin of an old-man kangaroo. For an eight-foot whip this belly was usually made five feet long, the last foot tapering away to nothing. Since the belly gave to the finished product the proper shape and foundation it had to be very carefully fashioned.

For the leather of the whip proper Bauman preferred the skin of a doe wallaroo. Doe kangaroo leather might be used at a pinch, but as a rule it was a shade too thin. After drying, a skin was hung for a week before proceeding, to make sure that every last vestige of moisture was evaporated from it. The least greenness caused a whip, when wetted, to ferment. A thoroughly dried skin would absorb a great deal of moisture before decomposition set in.

Soaking the skin in water for twenty-four hours came next, to bring it back to a limp condition. Then, so that the fur might be easily scraped off, it was immersed for three days in lime water. For scraping, Bauman used a double-bladed knife about fifteen inches long with a handle at each end. He made it himself from a cane knife.

Then came the tanning, which occupied another three weeks. And here, in describing his tanning process, was where Bauman became really impressive, for he had discovered a tanning process that, he claimed, would revolutionize the making of leather in Australia!

Chance had it that while watching Bauman at work a statement was broadcast by radio to the effect that a Melbourne firm had just imported 400 tons of Australian wattle bark from South Africa for tanning.

"Importing Australian wattle bark from South Africa!" Bauman boomed. "And this country is full of it! But there is no need to use wattle bark at all! Look at my leather! It's unbeatable. And I don't use bark for my tanning. I use something much better. And my substance is produced in this country in sufficient quantities to be used on a commercial scale."

Certainly the gloss on his finished skins was perfect. I watched him take the skin out of the tan, wash it, rub in a little mutton fat and neatsfoot oil and finally sleek it with a sleeking wood. Bauman had never seen the genuine trade article, the sleeking bone made from elephant's tusk. A piece of gidya or dead finish wood did the job for him.

Much might be said about the superiority of Bauman's special tanning substance [illegible] ce to state that

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Mining town, Mount Isa, North Queensland

Photo by Blanche Maynard

Aborigine girl, Gulf of Carpentaria

against the great quantities of bark necessary for extensive tanning operations Bauman tanned sixty large skins with only twenty-five pounds of his medium. And I may vouch for the fact that this element exists in large quantities.

After almost a month's preparation of the leather Bauman prepared the skin for the cutting of the strands. An even surface of good leather over all the hide was necessary and this he got by trimming down the outer edges till only the skin of the belly, the neck and the underarms was left.

The strands he cut with a razor-edged pocket knife he made himself out of bits and pieces of old knives. I watched him place a skin over his knee, take the knife in his right hand and, with a dual movement and equal pressure of pulling the knife towards him while the left hand pulled the skin away, cut a strand round and round, tapering it down till at the end it was like a fine thread. The strands of varying length he measured off with his arm, as a woman measures a length of material. Half the strands—he was engaged here on an eight-foot whip—were fourteen feet long. Six feet would be taken up in the plait. The shorter strands employed would drop back alternately to give the taper.

Belts were also a line of Bauman's; diamond-patterned belts which, as a stockman who owned one told me, "lasted for ever".

His wife's suite of dining-room furniture he had upholstered in his own red leather. Every room in the house contained specimens of his craftsmanship in woodwork. The handles of his whips he carved himself, out of southern rosewood, in delicate floral, conventional and symbolic designs. He made walking sticks with highly decorated heads out of the lovely ring gidya wood, and pipes to his own quaint and complicated designs. Chip carving, he called this work. All of it was done with a broken penknife.

The handles of his axes he made from China apple wood, which he claimed was equal to American hickory. I took note of old axes which over years had withstood the strain of the roughest bush-whacking work. Some handles had pieces "reefed" out of them but yet were without a crack.

Bauman also made his wife's house and yard brooms, indistinguishable from factory-made, out of his home-grown millet. He was the only grower of millet in that area. He scoffed amiably when I quizzed him about lessons. "I've never had a lesson in the making of anything in my life. . . . But you mustn't run away with the notion that I'm anything out of the box in back-country conditions. Not where ability is concerned, that is. Lots of blokes have all the ability I've got. What they lack is my drive; and the desire to make things with their own hands. I like to make things for my family."