

# A Vagabond: The Literary Journalism of John Stanley James

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**ABSTRACT:** The English-born John Stanley James—also known as Julian Thomas—began to write anonymously for the Melbourne *Argus* newspaper in 1876 under the nom de plum of “A Vagabond.” The pieces he contributed, later collected in *The Vagabond Papers* (1877), were first-hand accounts of life inside some of the strictest Australian institutions, including the Alfred Hospital, Pentridge Gaol, the Immigrants’ Home, and lunatic asylums. Although his accounts demonstrated literary pretensions, a cultivated flamboyance, and a pleasure in the self-aggrandizement of his anonymous narrator, they were nevertheless compassionate pleas for social reform. Later James contributed travel accounts to Australian newspapers following visits to the South Pacific and China. This paper traces and analyzes the work of James writing as “A Vagabond,” and argues for his recognition as one of the earliest exponents of Australian literary journalism.

In the mid-1870s, anonymous reports of life in colonial Melbourne began to surface in the *Argus* newspaper under the nom de plume “A Vagabond.” These stories of the everyday experiences of some of the poorest and least powerful members of Melbourne society were an instant hit with the paper’s readership. To gain his material, the Vagabond went undercover, often as an inmate or lowly employee, to write exposés of the workings of some of the colony’s harshest institutions, including Pentridge Gaol, the Immigrants’ Home, the Alfred Hospital, the Benevolent Asylum, and lunatic asylums. The stories were factual and lengthy, and betrayed an empathy with the subject matter that was in contrast to the sensationalist campaigns against poverty running in the English and American presses in the late nineteenth century. The Vagabond’s writings stirred passions, changed opinions, and prompted more than one public enquiry. Their detailed accuracy has drawn the attention

of historians, but little attention has been paid to them as early examples of Australian literary journalism. This paper examines the work of John Stanley James (also known as Julian Thomas) writing as “A Vagabond” and his role as a pioneer of the development of literary journalism in Australia.

It is well established through the work of historians such as Hartsock and Sims that American literary journalism has a long pedigree.<sup>1</sup> Despite Tom Wolfe’s claim that he and his fellow “New Journalists” of the 1960s and ’70s invented a new form of literature, it is established that American literary journalism includes the nineteenth-century writers Mark Twain and Stephen Crane, and arguably dates back as far as Daniel Defoe.<sup>2</sup> Australia, too, can claim a long lineage for the genre, with the writing of John Stanley James demonstrating it was practiced in the early days of the colony. James was writing as the “Vagabond” a quarter of a century before the founding of the Australian Federation in 1901, when Melbourne was still an outpost of the British Empire. His work was a precursor to other outstanding examples of Australian literary journalism that appeared in the late nineteenth century. Henry Lawson’s pieces about the Australian bush were published in the *Brisbane Boomerang*, the *Worker* and the *Bulletin* magazine throughout the 1890s.<sup>3</sup> Bruce Elder claims Lawson’s articles gave readers some of the first accurate depictions of Australian rural life in language as “raw as Ernest Hemingway or Raymond Carver.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout the same decade, Banjo Patterson was also featured in the *Bulletin*, later becoming a Boer War correspondent (1899–1900) sending dispatches in both prose and poetry to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* newspapers.<sup>5</sup> James predated by nearly two decades both these better-known writers whose works are closely allied with the development of an Australian literary and national identity.

Internationally, James was one of the first of a string of journalists who emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century with true stories of life in the slums of the world’s major English-speaking cities. Poverty was a growing issue in the press at the time, and universally thought of as a social ill that needed to be solved. Tensions between rich and poor were being fuelled by a developing urban underclass, repeated economic crises, and increasingly obvious social inequalities. Besides a number of declared social reformers, journalists, and writers—including Nellie Bly, Jacob Riis, Jack London, Josiah Flynt, Stephen Crane, Walter Wyckoff, and Bessie and Marie Van Vorst—began to report on poverty and its consequences. They wrote for a reading audience that was variously curious, disturbed in conscience, fearful of class violence, and concerned in case they, too, by some misfortune, should fall into the ranks of the poor. James, closest perhaps in style and outlook to Josiah Flynt,

wrote about the poor nonjudgmentally, with a humanity that comes from a shared understanding. He was a complex man; a man of his time, carrying the bigotry, racism, and sexism of his day. He was also morally conservative and openly judgmental of some of the more obvious by-products of destitution—prostitution and thievery. Yet James was never condescending to the poor simply because of their lack of means or social plight. In his view, there was nothing noble about poverty—no one should be sentenced to it—but nor was it a reason, of itself, to condemn a person.

#### THE VAGABOND PAPERS

James's first-hand, anonymous reports for the *Argus* newspaper over the course of 1876 were anything but dry reporting. Embodying many of the stylistic techniques accepted today as characteristic of literary journalism—including the use of scenes, a strong authorial point of view, and a conversational writing style—they were written with the primary aim of exposing the underbelly of institutional life in colonial Melbourne. To this end, the articles are packed with broader research and pragmatic reflections, while boasting suggestions for compassionate reform. To gather his material, James went undercover, immersing himself in his subjects for periods of time. For example, he spent three weeks as a porter in the Alfred Hospital; a month as an attendant in the Kew and Yarra Bend lunatic asylums; and three days as an inmate in the Benevolent Asylum (which had been built to house Melbourne's ill and destitute). In the preface to the first volume of *The Vagabond Papers*, James described his work as:

[S]triking out a new line in Australian journalism. . . . investigating the social life and public institutions of Melbourne from a point of view unattainable to the majority. I have everywhere been on "the inside track," and write from that eligible vantage point.<sup>6</sup>

As will be explored more fully, James wrote his shrewdly observed accounts of daily life in these institutions with flamboyance and dramatic flair. Lengthy, vivid, detailed, and accurate, their popularity grew over the course of the year they were published by the *Argus*, fuelled by their readability and their often controversial content, and by increasing curiosity about the identity of their author. In 1877–78 they were collated and published in five volumes as *The Vagabond Papers*, by the publisher George Robertson. An abridged version of the books was republished in one volume in 1969 by the historian Michael Cannon. Cannon, who included a contextualizing preface, arranged the contents in six sections: "Down and Out," "Life in Prison," "Middle Class Morality," "Cold Charity," "Manly Sports," and "The Demi-Monde."<sup>7</sup>

## INFORMING LIFE EVENTS

Born in 1843, James was the only son of a solicitor who ran a practice in Wolverhampton in Staffordshire, England. James's choice of "A Vagabond" as his pen name, and his compassion for society's most powerless, have been traced by Cannon to the experiences of his childhood.<sup>8</sup> His family may have been respectable, but life at home was devoid of affection, particularly from his father. At the age of twelve, James ran away from his English boarding school in what proved a defining experience at the cusp of adolescence. As he himself described it:

"Fagging" and bullying were then much in vogue, and I suffered from both. I fought the "cock of the school" for an hour, until I was in a far worse condition than many a pugilist after a prize fight. The only result was that I was severely punished by the headmaster. Then my soul grew hard within me, and I only thought of vengeance. In a short time I was again called on to "fag" by my tormentor. I refused, and the bully persuasively twisted my arm. After he had tortured me for a few minutes he let me go, and then, flying to primal man's first means of offence, everywhere provided by nature, I seized a sharp stone. The missile struck my antagonist fair on the temple . . . I was seized, and taken before the masters, and then locked up in my room. For two days I remained there, fed on bread and water. The headmaster once visited me, and in a severe lecture intimated that ——— would die, and I should be hanged. At least if he did recover I most likely would be handed over to the police, and endure public ignominy. I hardened my heart. The sense of the injustice of things in this world, which the very young perhaps alone feel, made me defiant. What did I care if my tormentor died? Care? I hoped he would die! . . . So on the third night I dropped from the window by the aid of the sheets, and before morning was in a large town fifteen miles off. . . . And when, three days after my absconding, I read a handbill describing my appearance and offering £100 reward for my recovery, I looked on this as an endeavor to capture a criminal, and not as the frightened efforts of the headmaster to undo his foolish work. For long months he thought I had drowned myself, and the school suffered considerably through the scandal.<sup>9</sup>

As Cannon reports, James did not head for home, where there was little warmth or understanding. Instead he sold his clothes for some "common, rough garments" and "began to tramp across England sleeping in villages, market-towns and cities frequenting threepenny and sixpenny lodging-houses used by hawkers, vagrants and beggars." Says Cannon, "In the indiscriminate mixture of humanity in the dormitories, he found 'much that was disgusting,' but he remembered the rough comradeship of the men with an affection that was its own bitter commentary on the icy nature of his home."<sup>10</sup>

Eventually, James did go home, completing his education at Walsall High School. He began an article clerkship with his father, but the reconciliation was short-lived. He soon fell in love, but his father forbade the liaison. So, around 1860, still a teenager, James fled to London. There he earned a living copying legal documents while lodging with a policeman who entertained and intrigued him with stories of his experiences on the beat. Consequently, James began to freelance crime news for the London newspapers, a move that in turn introduced him to London's low life and to the discipline of writing for an audience. After stints in more secure employment, as a booking clerk and then a stationmaster, a life that clearly did not suit his wandering nature, James returned to London's Grub Street.

A trip to Paris followed. It was 1870, the eve of both the Siege of Paris by the Prussians in the Franco-German War and the end of the Second French Empire. Parisian political tensions, which had been running high as part of a continued call for a democratic republic, were at breaking point in the face of the encroaching Prussian armed forces and consequent food rationing and unemployment. Within a few months, the rebellions would escalate into the establishment of the short-lived Paris Commune.<sup>11</sup>

The English were hungry for news of the riots across the channel. But within forty-eight hours of landing in Paris, James found himself on the wrong side of the authorities. By his own account, he was imprisoned as a spy for six weeks (until released on representations of the British embassy) because of his sympathy with the French Secessionists, the party that had been plotting to depose Napoleon III, and his acquaintance with one of the leading insurrectionists, Gustave Flourens: "In my callow days I was a rebel, and from Garibaldians to Fenians I have ever since had a sneaking fondness for those in arms against constituted authority."<sup>12</sup>

In 1872, he again found himself in sympathy with the oppressed when he traveled to Warwickshire to report on farm laborers' attempts to form an agricultural union and the working conditions—particularly the starvation-level wages—of its prospective members. Typically, James ignored the official statements of both sides, but instead went to see for himself what life was like for the farm laborers. He found their living conditions appalling, describing overcrowded cottages with poor sanitation, leaking roofs, and cracked walls. As Hugh Anderson comments, it was the sort of reporting at which James excelled: "[H]is style was direct and simple; he was sympathetic to the cause; and he possessed the 'news nose' of a hungry Fleet-Street 'penny-a-liner.'"<sup>13</sup>

After one last unsuccessful attempt to revive his relationship with his family, James gave up on England altogether. About 1872, when he was thirty, he dropped his family name and sailed to America, where he disembarked

as Julian Thomas, ready to begin afresh.<sup>14</sup> In the competitive arena of New York journalism, that was not to be. Unwilling to claim the work he had done as a journalist in England under the name of James, he had to begin again, with no friends or contacts and nothing to show for his previous career. After spending time in Virginia, where he claimed he married a rich widow, he migrated again as Julian Thomas, this time to Australia, fetching up in Melbourne sick, despondent, and almost broke—living the life of a vagabond and styling himself as an American with a largely fabricated American history.

James turned to freelancing. His first newspaper job in Australia was to write short notes on events of the week for Melbourne's *Punch*, but he clearly had higher ambitions. He turned up late one night in 1876 at the more reputable *Argus* and demanded that the night porter let him in to see the editor. The resulting row was loud enough to draw out Hugh George, the general manager. In George's words:

I asked, "What is it you want?" And the man replied, "I'm a journalist, and if this is the first-chop paper I take it for, that ought to be enough." "Come into my room," said I. When he got under the light his general get-up did not indicate prosperity, but he had eyes in his head, and they met mine in a way I liked. I took him short, however. "Now, what is it?" "I want to know if there is any show for a man who is a journalist on this paper." "It depends altogether on what sort of a journalist that man is." "That makes it easy, boss. He's the best (rather unquotable) journalist in this city." The audacity of that took me. I said, "Journalism does not seem to have brought you much wealth; in fact, I should judge that a sovereign would not come amiss to-night." "You're a white man! Shake!" We shook, and he left with a promise to let me have some copy the next day. The copy came to hand. That man was "The Vagabond," and his engagement was the most profitable contract in that department I ever made for the *Argus*.<sup>15</sup>

And so the Vagabond was born.

#### AVOIDING "MISERABILISM"

There was certainly precedent that showed the profitability of journalism that reported to middle-class readers on the evils of poverty. Jean Chababy, in his study *The Invention of Journalism*,<sup>16</sup> describes this field as "miserabilism." Its first exponent was James Greenwood, who in January 1866 wrote a series of four articles called "A Night in a Workhouse" for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The *Gazette* was a fledgling newspaper written for "gentlemen" readers and edited by Greenwood's brother, Frederick. James Greenwood chose the nom de plume "The Amateur Casual."<sup>17</sup> He began the series by warning readers that "no language with which I am acquainted is capable of conveying an adequate conception of the spectacle I then encountered." His articles

described “horrors with which [he] was surrounded” and from which there was no “escape.”<sup>18</sup> As Chalaby notes, poverty in itself is not newsworthy,<sup>19</sup> but journalists, by personifying the issue and bringing it to the public attention, “had struck what would reveal itself to be a gold-mine. . . . depicting the poverty and deprivation of the masses to upper-class readers.”<sup>20</sup>

Greenwood’s work saved his paper from bankruptcy, doubling its readership in three days, and demonstrating the economic advantages of sensationalist reporting. As Seth Koven notes, the articles “created a new mode of journalistic reporting—incognito social investigation using cross-class dress—and a new style of sensational and self-consciously theatrical writing about the poor.”<sup>21</sup> While Dickens and Mayhew had previously trawled the London slums to write about the poor, they had done so as sympathetic outsiders. Greenwood had gone a further step, masquerading as a tramp to experience firsthand what life was like spending a night in a ward for the homeless.

John Stanley James was influenced by these stories. Mimicking Greenwood’s headline and subject matter, his first story for the *Argus* was titled “A Night in the Model Lodging House,” the tale of his experiences going undercover in the equivalent of a London poorhouse—a sixpenny-a-night laborer’s dormitory. James went on to write many more articles. He became a hall porter at the Alfred Hospital, an inmate of the Benevolent Society and the Sailors’ Home, a dispenser of medicines at Pentridge Gaol, an attendant at Kew Lunatic Asylum, and dined in sixpenny restaurants and whiled away time at the Melbourne General Cemetery, observing keenly the goings on around him.

Yet, James’s journalism differed from his English predecessors’ in important ways, one of which was its concentration on powerlessness rather than poverty as the driving subject matter. James—as narrator, usually writing in the first person present tense—positioned himself as advocate for the marginalized and oppressed. He stood for those sections of Melbourne society that formed an underclass because they were without status in the colony, a position that poverty inevitably accompanied but did not necessarily cause. He reinforced this message to readers with his nom de plume, “A Vagabond,” which was chosen to reflect his use of immersion as a journalistic technique.. Although his narrative voice suggested he had connections with society’s powerful, the Vagabond’s point of view was not the eye of the higher classes looking in fascinated horror, pity, or contempt at the poor. He spurned the temptation to turn his subjects into a spectacle, always describing life on the edge with empathy and good humor, despite his reputation personally as a man with a hot temper and prickly personality.

## AVOIDING SENTIMENTALITY

As Michael Ignatieff has described it, “[S]entimental art, by definition, sacrifices nuance, ambivalence, and complexity in favor of strong emotion.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike the perpetrators of Chalaby’s “miserabilism,” James’s writing is marked by its lack of sensationalism. Alan Trachtenberg described Jacob Riis’s writing as sensational in *How the Other Half Lives* because “the reader is not permitted to cross into the inner world of the slum—into its own point of view.”<sup>23</sup> That is not a fault of James’s reporting. Unlike journalists who dropped briefly into the poor areas of London or New York for their stories, James spent large parts of his life on society’s margins just as his subjects did. He knew their world well and wrote about it, not with the attitude of a voyeur, but rather that of a participant. A passage from that first story, “A Night in the Model Lodging-House,” serves as an example of his realist approach:

I see that many of the lodgers are old hands, and appear to have their regular beds, to which they make their way as to their home. There has been little talking up to this, those who have gone to bed early being evidently tired out, but now two men at the end of the room nearest me begin an argument. . . . This is interrupted by the entrance of a decently-dressed youth, whom they tell not to keep them awake tonight. “I assure you, gentlemen,” says the youth as he takes off his coat, “that I went to sleep last night with my finger between my teeth, and this morning it was quite sore, but I’d do anything rather than disturb you.” I wonder with what strange malady he can be afflicted that involves such a curious mode of taking rest, till by the conversation I gather that before his time he has taken to gnash and grind his teeth, awakening all his neighbors. . . . And now it was nearly twelve o’clock, and a natty little figure dressed in clothes of a fashionable cut, and swinging a cane, walked down to a bed nearly opposite mine. The walk was that of a gentleman, and of one accustomed to field sports, but the new comer was evidently quite at home here, as he went straight to his bed—a sure sign that he was not a new hand.<sup>24</sup>

In this passage, James has located himself in the same community he writes about. Homelessness was a state he knew well, and it allows him to describe the experience, and the men he encountered, without condescension.

Hartsock has described empathy as an essential characteristic of literary journalism, so far as it avoids “reinforcing difference and [shows] commonalities instead.”<sup>25</sup> Sensationalism, he says, fails to “close the distance between [the writer’s] (and by implication [the] reader’s) subjectivity and the Other as object.”<sup>26</sup> Sensationalism, in other words, intentionally blurs factuality to stir readers’ emotions and create comfortable distance from what is described. Although known to occasionally embroider the facts of his own life, James

generally wrote not only with accuracy about the details of the lives of his subjects but also with empathy.

Unlike Greenwood and his followers, James did not lump the poor into a class for whom there was no hope. As someone who had been destitute himself, and as an immigrant with an antiauthoritarian bent, James believed morality was closely tied to material circumstances. It particularly pained him to see young people sentenced to a life of hardship, and he frequently commented in his writings about the possibilities, if not the need, for rescue and reform when well-placed help was given. Although conservative—especially when it came to women—it infuriated him when the rigid morality of the nineteenth century combined with destitution to drive young people into theft, violence, and/or prostitution. He was not religious and his views could be strongly anti-Church, but he had some sympathy for the people—often members of religious orders—who genuinely attempted to improve the lot of the poor.

In the story “The Magdalen Asylum,” he describes an encounter with a girl who “had been a barmaid, had been tempted and had gone ‘crooked’; the child was dead, but her mother, enraged by neighbors’ sneers, had turned her out of doors.”<sup>27</sup> James tracked down the mother and confirmed the girl’s story:

It is true they had a row, and she told Annie to clear out. She could not be disgraced with her in the house any longer. She had made her bed, and must lie in it. Thus said the mother. I spoke a few plain truths to that lady, which I am afraid only made her more bitter against her daughter. “I suppose you’re one of her gentlemen, come here to gammon me to keep her for you,” said the woman, firing up. Indignant, I left; but a few moments after I had a hearty laugh at my own foolishness, and I felt that I deserved all I got.

James found Annie a position in a country tavern and persuaded the mother to provide her with clothes and see her off to her new job by train. “Why spin this long tedious yarn?” he asks. “Well, only to show how the forces of society work against the weak, and as an example of how many stray ones there are who, with a little charitable feeling, may be kept from sinking lower, and, warned by the past, may be kept straight for the future.”<sup>28</sup>

His story “The Waifs and Strays of Sydney” is another case in point. Here he describes how he tracked a young match-seller to his home.

I persuaded Father Petre to accompany me to the Kelly-Cawmill home. He is as anxious as myself that something should be done to rescue this child from the degrading nocturnal life he is leading. . . . Proceedings I trust will shortly be taken to rescue Baby Kelly from his present life, and to give him a chance for the future.”<sup>29</sup>

In Australia, James had seen firsthand the link between opportunity and social responsibility. Convicts had routinely become exemplary citizens when given the chance, including such eminent figures from a generation earlier as the colonial surgeon William Redfern, the colonial architect Francis Greenwood, and the magistrate Andrew Thompson. It was a chance he sometimes would go out of his way to secure for the young people he wrote about.

#### IMMERSION JOURNALISM

In going undercover, James stretched the boundaries of the practice of immersion journalism, assuming a range of identities and spending not just one night, as Greenwood had done, but sometimes extended periods of time immersed in the worlds of his subjects. It was a technique that resulted in engaging, persuasive copy, particularly when told in James's strong narrative voice. At the time they were written, James's articles were highly controversial and drew a great many letters to the editor, both for and against. Cannon gives us a taste of some of the furore that resulted from the Vagabond's stories in the following passage from his introduction to the 1969 edition of *The Vagabond Papers*:

Did a well-known doctor perform lithotomy operations with his pocket-knife when proper surgical instruments were available? A public inquiry gravely established that the doctor had merely boasted, in front of his patients, that he could do the job with his pen-knife. Were elderly inmates of the Benevolent Asylum purposely starved to death in a primitive form of euthanasia? The authorities heatedly denied it, whereupon 114 inmates wrote to the committee supporting and expanding the Vagabond's observations. Were the bodies of pauper children thrown into a common grave at the Melbourne General Cemetery and interred without benefit of clergy? The cemetery chaplain said it was not so, whereupon J. H. Stanton, a citizen of note, testified that he had recently seen a weeping mother running through the cemetery trying to keep up with a wagon going at "a fair trot." Bumping from side to side was a coffin containing the body of her child, which was dumped into a grave without ceremony.<sup>30</sup>

While James's enjoyed embellishing his own biography, it seems that his articles were factually reliable. The institutions he criticized in his articles failed to silence him, despite the public controversies. No charge of falsity against him ever stuck. James continued to write, and to keep his anonymity as the Vagabond, well into 1877, while the managers of the public and Church-run institutions quaked at the thought he might turn up at any time in their establishments. As Cannon goes on to point out, when attempts such as those noted in the quote above by disgruntled members of the establishment "failed to challenge seriously the factual basis of the Vagabond's articles.

. . . some public authorities and even journalists envious of his success began to attack his [immersive] methods.” James admitted to his readers that his “mode of writing, and of obtaining information, is considered highly irregular, if not absolutely immoral,” but he was unconcerned as long as he had the approval of his editor and readers.<sup>31</sup> He has always had the support of Australia’s historians, who have noted the historical importance of his body of work as a rare and valuable record of Australian colonial life, both urban and rural.<sup>32</sup>

### STORYTELLING

James used all the skills of the literary craft. Besides being a journalist, he was also a poet and a playwright. One poem—“Sorrow, Love and I”—was published in 1889 in Frank Cates’s *Gags, A Miscellany in Prose and Verse*.<sup>33</sup> While some biographers, such as J. B. (John Butler) Cooper<sup>34</sup> and Cannon, have questioned James’s success as a dramatist, Eric Irvin argues he was a very successful playwright, writing and producing several plays over his lifetime that ran to much acclaim in a number of Australian cities.<sup>35</sup> These included *No Mercy*, a free adaptation of *La Mort Civile* by the Italian dramatist Paolo Giacometti, and an original work, *The Nihilists, or Russia as It Is*, that ran to five acts. Says Irvin, “The truth is that there were few newspaper men with literary inclinations in nineteenth century Australia who were not connected in one way or another with the theatre—as reviewers, eager spectators, active dramatists, or amateur actors.”<sup>36</sup>

James’s skill as a dramatist is evident in his articles—he writes scenes, uses dialogue and description, and creates a strong sense of character (not least his own) to enliven his writing and bring home his points. One of the most notable features of James’s work is the light-heartedness he sometimes chose to bring to the grimmest of topics. An almost Gonzo-like humor could surface in his stories, though not always as forcefully as in this excerpt from “A Month in Pentridge,” where he describes with gusto being called on to extract a prisoner’s tooth:

“You can pull out teeth, I suppose?” said the doctor, turning to me. I sort of hesitated. “Who was the man?” I asked. “The hangman Gately, but they call him Balleyram here,” was the reply. I accepted the doctor’s case of instruments with alacrity, and expressed my readiness to pull out every tooth in “Balleyram’s” head. I have never had any practice in dentistry, and this was my maiden effort in that line. With any other subject I certainly should have hesitated, as I dislike giving needless pain; but Gately I had little sympathy for. . . . “Now, then, old man, let’s have a look at this tooth.” He opened his foul jaws. Faugh! “Sit down.” “Oh, doctor, don’t hurt me,” he cried, as, with a professional air, I opened the pocket-case, and spread the forceps on the

little table. “Oh!” he cried, as the first pull broke off a piece of the tooth, the forceps slipping. “Just hold his head, and if he stirs bang it against the wall,” said I to one of the warders. There was a laugh—the new dispenser was “a queer sort,” evidently. I took out the largest and strongest pair of forceps, which would pull a tooth out of a crocodile. One grip, a roar from Gately, a twist of the wrist, and out came the tusk. With the consciousness of talent, I wiped the instruments carefully, whilst the warders looked on admiringly. “I must get you to look at my teeth,” said one of them. “Have it out now,” said I. “If there’s one thing I can do better than another, it’s this—I’m—on teeth.” The warder shuddered, and said he hadn’t time just then.<sup>37</sup>

James displayed a virtuosity in storytelling by using scenes, dialogue and description, humor, and character. The last is clearly demonstrated in this excerpt where the character of the warder is shown shifting from admiring the Vagabond’s skill as tooth puller to shuddering at the thought of having his own tooth extracted by James.

#### AFTER MELBOURNE

James’s work as the Vagabond made him a public figure, to the extent that “The Vag” featured as a character in the 1877 Melbourne Christmas pantomime.<sup>38</sup> Melbourne *Punch* satirized his work, publishing an article titled “Three weeks in a Nunnery in which the Vagabond Got a Job as a Cook to the Mother Superior in order to Discover Whether She Ate Meat on Fridays.”<sup>39</sup> Crowds curious “almost to the point of frenzy” as to his real identity gathered on the station platform where it was reported that the Vagabond regularly caught a train.<sup>40</sup> The subterfuge couldn’t be sustained, and eventually James claimed his identity as the journalist Julian Thomas, bringing the reports of the Vagabond to an end, though not before James milked his fame as far as he could, outrageously embroidering his American past and claiming falsely that he fought in the American Civil War.

James left the *Argus* in 1877 and, following his editor there, Hugh George, sailed north to contribute similar reports on Sydney’s underclass to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The Sydney articles never achieved the influence or popularity of the earlier Melbourne pieces. In November of that year, he traveled to Cooktown in Australia’s far north to report for the *Argus* on the influx of Chinese gold diggers. Later, James went on to work for various Australian papers as a correspondent in New Caledonia, the New Hebrides, New Guinea, Tonga, Samoa, and China. Although his writings—collected in *Cannibals and Convicts* (1886) and *Occident and Orient* (1882)—betray a racism and anti-Semitism unacceptable today, they also show an author who was unusually willing to side with those who were the weakest in the power equations of colonialism.

At times, he used his skill as a literary journalist to powerful effect. His vivid accounts of a native uprising in New Caledonia in 1878, and the brutal response to it (specifically his eyewitness account of the killing of five Kanaks, including a thirteen-year-old boy), shocked his Sydney readers much more than the descriptions of their own slums and swayed public opinion against the French colonial administration.<sup>41</sup> His reports from New Hebrides for the *Age* on “blackbirding,” the practice of recruiting labor for the cane-fields, alleged “slavery pure and simple” perpetrated by the New Hebrides Company. He claimed the planters bought natives for ten pounds per head without any contract rights, and that irons and the lash were used on men and women who refused to work.<sup>42</sup>

James spent the latter part of his life moving in and out of journalism, and in and out of poverty. His forthright approach did not always suit the policies of the newspaper proprietors. In 1884, he signed a three-year agreement to travel rural Victoria to describe the country towns for a series for the *Argus*. His articles on Victoria finished abruptly when the residents of Mooropna took offence at his reporting and a town meeting resolved to boycott the *Argus*. James resigned rather than be recalled to Melbourne.<sup>43</sup>

James’s professional reputation suffered as a consequence of one of the last major assignments of his career, when he traveled for the *Age* to report on political unrest in Samoa and Tonga in 1887. Civil war threatened Samoa, where the British and the Germans were backing rival tribal chiefs, but order was restored, just as James arrived, with the reinstatement of the British puppet-chief. James sailed on to Tonga where the Reverend Shirley Baker was prime minister under the native King George I. Baker, a former Wesleyan missionary, had renounced the Wesleyans, who opposed his leadership, and had set up his own church, the Free Tongan Methodist Church. In his articles for the *Age*, James supported Baker’s policies, which caused the Wesleyan-backed Melbourne *Spectator* to attack James, accusing him of taking bribes from Baker with money from the Tongan treasury. James retaliated with a libel action against the *Spectator*. While he won the case, the damage against the reputation of “The Vagabond” was assessed by the jury at a farthing—a coin that James later wore on his watch chain. While the verdict helped him partially save face, and he continued to write occasional articles for the *Age*, his career as a journalist never fully recovered.<sup>44</sup>

Subsequently, the parliamentarian Ephraim Zox found him a position as Secretary of the Victorian Royal Commission on Charities that James held from 1890 to ’92. The commission was to enquire into allegations regularly appearing in the press concerning abuses and scandals in the hospitals and charitable institutions. As is the way with so many royal commissions, the

enquiry proved pointless. James, whose health had started to fail, returned to filing copy for the *Age* and the *Leader*, mostly helping to compile illustrated supplements on country towns. Half-blind and suffering heart disease and asthma, he was writing copy just before he went to bed at his lodgings in Princes Street, Fitzroy, on the night of September 3, 1896. His body was discovered the next morning. James may have died penniless and alone, but he was held in great affection by the people he championed. According to Cannon:

[Two days after his death] Princes Street was jammed with vehicles and people anxious to join his funeral cortege. Among the hundreds of wreaths was one from the Neglected Children's Aid Society "with deep regret from the little ones in the home," and another from Lady Janet Clarke as a "last tribute of respect to one whose able pen has helped to make many lives more cheerful."<sup>45</sup>

James was buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery, the site marked by a carved tombstone erected by public subscription throughout Australia. It simply says, "To Julian Thomas—the Vagabond."

#### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that John Stanley James was a colorful character whose own life was at least as interesting as those he wrote about. Yet, he was also, as Irvin states, a prolific and important writer whose work is closely bound with the social and political history of Australia and the Pacific.<sup>46</sup> James's eyewitness reports are justifiably valued by historians for the unique, detailed, and accurate picture they paint of life in colonial Australia. His writing spoke to both the intellect and emotions of his readers, influencing policy makers and encouraging social change in the Melbourne of which he wrote. If literary journalism can be defined by its stylistic use of the techniques of long-form storytelling while portraying real life—and, as Hartsock asserts, by its author's empathy with its subjects—then James deserves to be recognized as one of the earliest exponents of the genre as it has been practiced in Australia.

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## NOTES

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17. Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 26.
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34. J.B. Cooper, "Who Was the Vagabond?"
35. Eric Irvin, "'The Vagabond' as Playwright," *Southerly* 41, no. 1 (March 1981): 106–120.
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41. Barnes, "James, John Stanley (1843–1896)," n.p., <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/james-john-stanley-3848/text6113>.

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43. Anderson, "Vagabond Journalist," 19.
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46. Irvin, "'The Vagabond' as Playwright," 120.

# John Stanley James Writes as “A Vagabond” in 1877

Selected by Willa McDonald

## A MONTH IN PENTRIDGE

BY A VAGABOND

I have been spending four weeks in Pentridge prison. A short sentence, most people will say, and entirely too mild a one for my deserts. I am afraid some will be disappointed when they learn that *this time* (for who can tell what the future may bring?) I have not been in gaol as a prisoner. No! I am getting on in the world. From the lunatic asylums to the Alfred Hospital was a step in the social scale of service, but the hall-porter was quite an humble individual compared to the warder-dispenser at Pentridge. For a month I have occupied that exalted position, and have been pushing pills, slinging draughts, pulling out teeth, and bullying patients as if to the manner born. I consider myself such a success in this line of business that I have thought of abandoning my vagabond career and becoming respectable. Two courses are open to me—to start a chemist’s shop and realise a rapid fortune by selling “pick-me-ups” on Sundays, and “ladies’ restoratives” during the week (I daresay there are people in Australia who have spent eighteen pence at the French chemist’s in Bond-street); or I may become a fashionable dentist; a polite style, plenty of “cheek,” and spotless linen would disguise my ignorance, and in a very short time I might drive fast horses. But I am afraid I am too honest ever to become wealthy and respectable—by such methods.

I was amiss about Christmas time. I don’t know whether it was the cricket match, the pantomime, or the English fare of the season (a horror in this



*Published in the Melbourne Argus, February 24, 1877, page 4. First of an eight-part series, “A Visit to Pentridge.” Courtesy National Library of Australia.*

climate!) which affected me. I felt that I wanted change of air. A gentleman who kindly interests himself in my movements agreed with me, but added a rider, "You also want work; you're getting lazy." I admitted the latter fact, but denied the former. "Work in general is a curse, and I hate it," said I. "It's real original sin. In particular, I am sure Providence never meant white men to work in this climate; they should only look on, and cuss the niggers. Indeed I am not sure that white men were ever intended to work anywhere? For myself, I know that I am a natural-born boss. A month by the seaside, with unlimited expenses, seems about all I am fit for now. My shattered health wants recuperating." "Sir," was the stern reply, "this is flippancy; what you want is work and change of scene, but, above all, work." I said I didn't, but it was no use. Having rashly admitted a knowledge of medicine, I was recommended to the Chief Secretary as a fit and proper person to fill the vacant post of dispenser at Pentridge prison hospital, and the pipes being laid, I made a formal application for the place. On the 13th of January I received an order to wait on the inspector-general, and 11 o'clock of that day found me in the dismal building which serves as the office of the Penal and Industrial Schools department. My letter gained me admission to Mr. Duncan, who looks a good man of the Scotch farm bailiff type. In tones of authority, he questioned me, and then handed me over to the chief clerk, Mr. Snelling, who took my signature to an agreement by which I bound myself under sundry pains and penalties to faithfully serve the Victorian Government as hospital warder, dispenser, and assistant. Then I received a letter of appointment to the Superintendent, and was told to be at Pentridge by 10 o'clock on the following Monday. Behold me then a vagabond no longer, but an embryo civil servant, serving the country for the magnificent salary of 6s. 6d. a day, with quarters, 1s. per diem being deducted for such. The dispenser I found was the only officer required to sleep on the premises, and therefore had to pay for his quarters, other warders commencing with 7s. 6d. a day. I found out afterwards what a sell this was on the poor dispenser.

**I**t is a miserable ride along the Sydney-road to Coburg. The cabs, I suppose, are no worse than cabs on other routes, but under any circumstances, they are wretched conveyances. The road itself is a bad one, and the country dreary. This, which should be one of the finest boulevards around Melbourne, is spoilt through the difficulty of getting in and out of town. The road all the way to Brunswick and Coburg should be lined with pleasant cottages, but these will never be built until better means of communication are provided. Dwellers between Coburg and Brunswick and Melbourne labour under exactly the same disadvantages as inhabitants on the St. Kilda-road. Cabs generally will not start into town until they are full, and those who live

*en route* have to often wait or walk. Going out, too, the delay in starting is most wearisome and annoying. The one thing needed to make Brunswick and Coburg pleasant places of residence is a street railroad, or, as you would say here, a tramway. The road is wide enough for the track to be laid without there being a chance of inconvenience to other traffic. Clean, pleasant cars, regular periods of starting, and fixed fares would insure the success of such an undertaking, and not only would the present inhabitants of the German-named villages be benefited, but the property-holders *en route* would find that their “eligible building sites” would rapidly be disposed of. I write feelingly on this subject, as several times during the past month I have been greatly annoyed by the delay, having had to wait long at each end through there being no regular hour of starting. Coburg is getting quite a place. It was, I presume, first called into existence by the “Stockade,” although it has now repudiated its family name, Still, in spite of its shire-hall, orderly-room, Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Wesleyan Churches which satisfy the wants of the village and surrounding neighbourhood, Coburg is as yet a mere appanage of Pentridge. The prison forms the whole topic of conversation, and its officials rule the place.

“You may change, you may alter the name as you will,  
But the taint of the Stockade is over it still.”

When the swindler Gottheimer changed his name to Albert Grant, an old chum said to him, “My friend, you may change your name, but you can’t change a very prominent feature.” So with Coburg; it is no longer Pentridge, so to speak it ostensibly repudiates any connexion with a penal *depôt*, but it cannot get rid of those massive blue-stone buildings and high walls which form the most prominent feature in the surrounding landscape. In the village side trees have been planted and churches built, and a very endeavour made to hide the obnoxious thing, but walk a little to the north or the east and it stands out clearly defined on the slope of the hill, and one sees how large Pentridge is, and how small Coburg, as yet. However, the village has all the elements of a live place, and if they will only get a tramway, I think I will go and live there.

The outside of Pentridge is not very dreary-looking. The trees on the roadside, and the strip of greensward which has been left along the front, and enclosed by iron railings, relieve the monotony of the bare walls. The entrance is by an archway in the building used as offices and stores. This is guarded by double gates—the outer one of strong oak, the inner of iron bars. Doors in both of these admit those who have duties or business in the prison. Alighting from my cab, and knocking at the door, I was challenged through a little barred grating. On expressing my wish to see the superintendent I was

allowed to cross the first barrier, and found myself “between the gates,” as the archway is termed in the prison. Seeing that my “swag” excited attention, I stated that I was coming to be dispenser. “So you’re our new chemist,” said the warder who admitted me “Well, you’d better go and see the super., then; he’s in his office.” Admitted through the second barrier, I was directed to the first door in the buildings on my left, and entering the office I was brought before the dread presence of the superintendent, Mr. Robert Gardiner. I found him a man looking younger than his years, with coarse features, a sharp eye, and a flexible nose like Lord Brougham’s. He read my credentials, and called for the chief warder Warrick, ordering him to take me to the doctor, and see that I was properly inducted into my duties. I was accordingly conducted to the doctor’s house, which, adjoined by the assistant-superintendent’s, is situated on the left of the first yard entered. Dr. Reed was at home, and called me into his study to question me. I satisfied him that I was a most competent chemist, and that I should prove a valuable assistant, and then I was again turned over to Warrick. The chief warder of the guard is a quiet spoken individual, with a smooth manner, which has procured him from some the *sobriquet* of “Oily Gammon.” His kind heart will not allow him to censure any one, so he will speak him mildly and kindly, leaving a little report in the book to be dealt with by the superintendent, who is another sort of a man. In justice to Warrick, however, I must state that I believe he often overlooks or condones slight sins of omission and commission, and, considering his position, is very fairly spoken of by the men. I have no fault to find with him; he always treated me well, although I believe he was instrumental in “patting” a few games on the new dispenser. Warrick led me out of the front gates, round the walls, and through a door into the portion of the reserve occupied by the Jika reformatory schools and inspector-general’s and superintendent’s quarters. These are all enclosed by one high wall, but outside Pentridge Gaol, which is walled in, a prison within a prison. Here, at what is known as the lower guardroom, I subscribed my name to a manuscript declaration, entailing on me more pains and penalties. I found now that, although a dispenser, and having full charge of the hospital, I only ranked as a junior warder. If I had been a chemist, I have no doubt this would have hurt my feelings; but of this more anon.

Escorted back by Warrick, I was handed over to the doctor, my immediate superior, and by him taken to the hospital, which is in a second yard, divided from the first by an iron fence. Here I found a sharp-looking warder, in appearance and manner remarkably like a terrier, who was temporarily in charge of the establishment, and who was to remain with me for a day to coach me in the duties of locking and unlocking. Dr. Reed took me round the building, and pointed out to me the prisoners who occupied positions as

“billets.” I found that I had seven of these under my control, the dispenser being the only official in the hospital. First there was the clerk, who assisted in keeping the hospital books, made out daily returns, and delivered medicine to the out-patients in two of the divisions. There were two wardsmen and a nurse (male) engaged to attend on a special case. These were all employed upstairs. Below I had the surgery and hall porter, whose special duty it was to attend to my immediate wants, a washerman and storekeeper, and last, but not least, the cook. These hospital billets, although some of the men worked hard and fairly earned more than their board, are the most coveted positions at Pentridge, owing to the amount of freedom and necessary communication with other prisoners. Disciplinarians consider that the hospital is the weak point in the administration. It is supposed to be the breeding ground of all discontent and defiance of authority, and to be the headquarters of “traffic” in tobacco, which is the sin without forgiveness in the superintendent’s eyes. With only one official, who has often to be absent from his post in other parts of the prison, and who cannot be mixing draughts and at the same time keep a strict watch in the wards, the discipline here cannot be so severe as in other divisions. Privileged prisoners employed in “billets” in the office or stores can, and do, march in and out on pretence of business, and have plenty of time to chat and “traffic” with their mates whilst the dispenser is engaged in the surgery below. But outside that little mischief can be done, as when patients are discharged from the hospital strict discipline in their own divisions should counterbalance the slight relaxation of authority which they had enjoyed whilst sick. Prisoners in the hospital are treated primarily as patients the one object being to cure them; secondly, they are treated as prisoners, but the rules and regulations they are subject to are scarcely more stringent than those in force at the Melbourne and Alfred Hospitals. Of one thing I am satisfied—sick men at Pentridge are far better treated than those at the Benevolent Asylum; and with the exception of the associations and situation, their lot is equal to that of the inmates of many hospitals in Australia and Great Britain. They need not be afraid of surgical experiments with corkscrews and pocket knives. People may cry out at prisoners receiving so much attention and comfort, but they would be wrong. To Dr. Reed a sick prisoner becomes only “a case,” and his sole desire appears to be, by the best possible available treatment, to turn him out cured and fit for work. To the physician, the guilt of a prisoner is sunk in the pain of the patient, and he cares nothing for his crime or antecedents, except so far as they may throw light on the man’s condition, or give a hint as to “malingering.” That Dr. Reed is fully equal to the disagreeable and unthankful duties of a prison surgeon is proved by the very small percentage of cases in the hospital and of deaths and sickness.

In less than half an hour after I landed at Pentridge I had my first "case." It happened thusly. After being shown round the wards, and receiving instructions from Dr. Reed, we returned to the surgery. There the warder addressed the doctor, "I've just come up from A Division, and there's Ballyram wants a tooth out. Will you go down there, sir?" "You can pull out teeth, I suppose?" said the doctor, turning to me. I sort of hesitated. "Who was the man?" I asked. "The hangman Gately, but they call him Ballyram here," was the reply. I accepted the doctor's case of instruments with alacrity and expressed my readiness to pull out every tooth in "Ballyram's" head. I have never had any practice in dentistry, and this was my maiden effort in that line. With any other subject I certainly should have hesitated, as I dislike giving needless pain, but Gately I had little sympathy for. I had seen him but once—at the execution of Bondietto—a transaction which I give him credit for despatching with much neatness. But the man's brutal appearance corresponded with his vocation, and I could well believe that he enjoyed his work, and that he was guilty of the atrocities for which he is now undergoing punishment. So I did not mind giving him a little pain. If I proved a success in this line of business I would go on, but if not, I must renounce tooth-drawing under some pretence, and Gately alone would suffer by my inexperience. "Come along," said the warder. "I'll take you down to A Division." So locking up the surgery, which is secured by a heavy bolt, fastened with a Chubb's padlock, we sallied out. We marched into the entrance yard and down the pathway between the prison wall and the doctor's garden, and soon came to another wall, which is the boundary of the original prison for males. At the corner there is a tower, one of several which diversify the outer walls, and on a small and narrow platform on top of this, a sentry paces. The entrance is from outside by a small doorway and winding staircase inside the tower, so that the several sentries, armed with rifles and revolvers, are within their range masters of the position. A small iron door in the wall is opened by one of the prisoners who acts as gatekeeper here, another coveted and easy "billet." The sentry lets down the key in a little bag attached to a cord, and it is afterwards returned to him by the same means. My companion tells me that we are now in the A division, which amongst the prisoners is popularly known as "the model," being evidently christened such by some old London "prig" who had graduated at "the model," Pentonville Prison, in the Caledonian-road. This enclosure here is a large one, and is only occupied by the prison formerly devoted to women; and the cottages of the four chief warders, who, before they became civil servants, were called sergeants. But I must defer a thorough description, for "Balleyram" [sic] is waiting to have his tooth out. Entering the prison, passing the office, library, bath, and store-rooms, and through two gates of

strong iron bars, we find ourselves in “the model,” which is unlike its sponsor at Pentonville in that it is only designed for three wings or corridors, two as yet being built, instead of four as in the London institution, and that it only contains two tiers of cells. Three or four warders, dressed in the simple uniform of the penal institutions are lounging about a table over which are a number of hooks holding keys, staves, handcuffs, and other outward and visible signs of authority. To them I am introduced as the new dispenser, and we exchange polite salutations and a little badinage, after the manner of our kind. “He’s come to pull out Balleyram’s tooth,” said my introducer, and one of the warders escorts me to cell 93. The rattle of the key in the lock arouses the occupant, who springs to the position of “attention,” as required by the regulations, and entering I find myself face to face with the last minister of Victorian law—Gately—convict and executioner.

A frightful animal—the immense head, powerful protruding jaw, narrow receding forehead and deficient brain space, seemed fitly joined to tremendous shoulders and long, strong arms, like those of a gorilla, which he resembles more than a man. All the evil passions appeared to have their home behind that repellant, revolting countenance. With an instinctive movement, which my companions would not understand, I placed my hand on my hip. As a brute and a hangman (I trust this is not a premonitory warning) the man was alike distasteful to me. But in a second I remembered that here he was but a prisoner, No. 93, and the power of authority was visible all around me. I recovered my part, “Now, then, old man, let’s have a look at this tooth.” He opened his foul jaws. Faugh! “Sit down.” “Oh, doctor, don’t hurt me,” he cried, as with a professional air I opened the pocket case and spread the forceps on the little table. “Oh!” he cried as the first pull broke off a piece of the tooth, the forceps slipping. “Just hold his head, and if he stirs bang it against the wall,” said I to one of the warders. There was a laugh, the new dispenser was “a queer sort,” evidently. I took out the largest and strongest pair of forceps, which would pull a tooth out of a crocodile. One grip, a roar from Gately, a twist of the wrist, and out came the tusk. With the consciousness of talent, I wiped the instruments carefully, whilst the warders looked on admiringly. “I must get you to look at my teeth,” said one of them. “Have it out now,” said I. “If there’s one thing I can do better than another, it’s this—I’m—on teeth” The warder shuddered, and said he hadn’t time just then. This little operation gave me much *éclat*, and by the mysterious underground railroad of the prison was circulated through all the divisions to such an extent, that for a time I had quite a business in extracting old stumps, which only fell off after I broke two forceps in a man’s jaw. He wouldn’t try a third attempt, when I meant to put the bulldog on him, and have out that stump or his

jaw-bone. I left the cell fully satisfied of my capacity to pass as a dentist; and now the thing was over, amused at my first case. Poor Gately. All the world is down on him, and when free he had not a place to lay his head. A natural brute, he is as God, or the devil, made him, for it is hard to believe that any spark of aught Divine can rest in such a frame. An "old hand," he has had experience of the prisons of Tasmania, New South Wales, and Victoria, passing his whole life in and out of gaol. He goes by the several names of Gately, Balleyram, and Fagin, and was an Irishman and a Roman Catholic. But his long experience of prison life has taught him that, owing to the practice of confession, it is hard to gammon the priest, and, casting around for some other creed, by professing which he might obtain somewhat, Balleyram became a convert to Judaism. I never met a converted Jew—I believe they cost half a million each, and the article is then very inferior—but I have heard of such. A converted Christian I never heard of, and Gately, Fagin, or Balleyram should be celebrated on this account. I am afraid, however, that the respectable members of the Jewish race, who add so much to the prosperity of the colonies by their industry and public spirit, will no more own Gately than they would the Thompsons. However, he says he's a Jew; his intentions are good, and he ought to know. I did not examine him as to the tenets, &c., of his faith. The peculiar fact in this conversion is the cause—a longing for pass-over cake. Gately found out that Jews were supplied with this at the proper season, and seeing that it was a luxury compared to prison fare, has been running on the Hebrew ticket ever since. But this strange caricature of humanity is not all evil. On one occasion he saved the life of an overseer. Some years back they were working in the quarry, and a plot was made to "muckle" the overseer, who was considered a hard taskmaster. The one who was to strike the first blow knocked the overseer from the bank into the quarry. His leg was broken, and a prisoner approached to finish him with an axe, when Balleyram intervened, and by his threats and enormous strength subdued the rioters. For this, I am told, he obtained a remission of his sentence, and was afterwards appointed executioner. The effect of such an office on the individual may be learned from the evidence of warders who have known Gately for years. These all say that his conduct now is greatly worse than when he was an ordinary criminal. Let this be recorded to his credit—he *could* be degraded and made worse by the influences of his debasing office.

Leaving the A Division with my cicerone, at the door we met Mr. Begg, the chief warder there. He is the Beau Brummel of Pentridge. Faultlessly neat, his uniform seems unlike that of any other man. He wears immaculate linen and white cotton gloves. There is not a speck of dust nor a wrinkle about him, and in his get-up he is a credit to the establishment. Begg is as particular

about the neatness and order of his division as in his attire; dirt to him is real original sin, and the corridors, walls, doors, and locks are scrubbed, and rubbed, and polished to an extent unknown elsewhere. Begg welcomes me severely, his cold eye glancing over my costume, criticising my paper collar and shabby genteel coat. I am evidently not up to his standard of neatness and order. "When you come here to give medicine to prisoners," says he, "I hope you won't spill any on the stones. The other dispenser used to do so, and it leaves stains which we can't get out." After promising not to offend in this manner we return to the hospital. Sitting in the surgery, my companion more particularly instructs me in my duties. It seems that the dispenser has to sleep in a room upstairs, which during the day is occupied as an office, and is filled with shelves of books, instruments, a spirometer, microscope, &c. A few minutes before 6 in the morning I have to rise and get the keys from between the gates, and on the stroke of the hour, parade with the other warders. Then I come to the hospital, and unlock all the doors of the wards, kitchen, stores, &c. A prisoner is despatched to the divisions with medicine for the out-patients, to be administered before they go out to work. From 7 to 8 I am relieved for breakfast. On returning, I wait on the doctor, who makes a tour of inspection through the building, visits the wards, and examines the patients. He fills in a daily record as to their state, treatment, &c., "in the English language," according to the sensible regulations. Afterwards I have to see that the whole building is thoroughly cleaned, make up required medicines, and generally be all eyes and ears to prevent communication between outside prisoners and patients. At 10 o'clock, accompanied by a prisoner, I have to go to A division and give out the medicine there as ordered by the doctor. Soon after 11 the "muster" bell is rung, and I have to count all my patients. At half-past 11 the doctor again attends at the surgery, and out-patients and others complaining are brought thither by warders. Some are admitted, some ordered medicine to be given then in their cells. From half-past 12 to half-past 1 is my dinner hour. In the afternoon the superintendent will possibly be round, and I have to wait upon him. At 3 o'clock I again proceed to dose the solitary prisoners in "the model." At 5 o'clock there is evening muster, and a little before 6 I lock up all the wards and rooms in the presence of a man sent to assist me, who signs the night-book as a guarantee of the faithful performance of my duty. The night sentry, armed with cutlass and revolver, then arrives, and counts the prisoners in the different wards, seeing that he has the number on the list made out for him. At six o'clock the bell rings, and locking the outer door, leaving the sentry inside, I take the keys to the gate, and until ten o'clock am a free man. By that time I have to be again within the gates, and by one of the warders on duty there

am taken to the hospital, and locked in for the night. The amount of locking and unlocking is frightful. All the doors are secured by strong bars and heavy padlocks, those attached to the wards being also enclosed in a lock case. I think I had over 60 keys to contend with, and although in time I began to know these, still the process of locking up at night and unlocking in the morning was a tedious one, and in the event of a fire, before the keys could be obtained and all the patients released, I think some of them would stand a good chance of being burnt to death.

On this the first morning of my arrival in Pentridge I tried hard to master all those different details, determined, as far as my mission would allow, to faithfully fulfil the obligations I had entered into with the Government of Victoria. I carefully studied the regulation-book given me by Chief Warden Warrick. In this no such person as a dispenser is recognised, and special orders are made for his guidance by the medical officer, but my attention was drawn to the following rules, which would peculiarly affect me, although I suppose "His Excellency Viscount Canterbury and the Executive Council" had no such intention when they framed them:—

"4. In enforcing obedience by the convicts, they (the warders) will be firm but temperate, carefully avoiding the use of harsh or irritating language or gestures, and only resorting to force when absolutely necessary.

"7. They will on no account accept any fee or reward for the performance of any portion of their duties.

"8. They will not receive any present from, or traffic or hold familiar intercourse with, any prisoner, or with any friend or relation of a prisoner, or hold any communication with either, except so far as may be necessary for the proper discharge of their duties.

"9. When in presence or hearing of any convict, they are not to smoke, use improper language, or enter into discussions or altercations with each other, particularly on points of duty. They will always on such occasions be most guarded in their conversation and demeanour.

"10. They are not to write letters to newspapers on matters connected with the department, but if aggrieved must complain, through the proper channel, to the inspector."

The following acts I read are declared offences for which warders will be liable to punishment:—

"Talking, reading, or smoking when on duty. Wrangling, disputing, or quarrelling, whether on public or private matters. Introducing wine, beer, or any spirituous liquor into any part of the prison, unless ordered by the medical officer. Giving any article whatever to a prisoner, whether with or without a consideration. Entering into any correspondence or addressing any

communication whatever in his official capacity except through the proper channel. Removing any article or property from the prison without proper authority. Absenting himself from duty or from the prison without leave. Card-playing or gambling. Drunkenness.”

The list is pretty comprehensive, and as regards the “talking, reading, and writing to newspapers,” I am afraid I have rendered myself “liable to punishment.” The medical officers’ rules with respect to hospital management I carried out to the best of my ability, and I do not think Dr. Reed had anything to complain of in my conduct as a dispenser. I broke one regulation, however. “The dispenser is not allowed to prescribe or practise for any one outside the Stockade without permission from the medical officer.” I did have one patient, a very interesting case, and I am happy to say I effected a complete cure.

**B**ut I admit that as I read the rules and regulations, temptation entered into my soul. I remembered recent criticisms of a friend of mine. “You’re getting demoralised,” said he. “These mornings in churches, trips down the bay, and flirtations with nuns, are all very well in their way, but they are ruining you for work. You want to do something big, something to startle and attract general attention and sustain your fame. The public demands it, and they must be satisfied. You were splendid at the Benevolent Asylum and at Kew, but at a church and in a nunnery you’re only half a vagabond, and people will begin to think you’re played out. You must satisfy the legitimate demands of the public. People who have read you are like tigers who have tasted blood—they crave for more.” “Thank you,” said I moodily; “but how is this thing to end? Must I go on sacrificing myself forever? And when will the public be satisfied? Must I keep on working up sensational truths till there is nothing left for me but to shoot a bookmaker, and give graphic and truthful accounts of the arrest, imprisonment, trial, verdict, condemned cell, last hours, and drop, finishing my last copy before I was turned off? That would be a big thing, and might satisfy the public. At present I must do what I can; but I promise you, if I live, that I will do bigger things than any I have yet written about. You shall be satisfied that the preaching of Mr. Pearce and the prayers of the Rev. Mother have not demoralised me. I wish I could get up a ‘dog and-man fight;’ but here you have no ‘black country’ in which to locate it, although I firmly believe that Mr. James Greenwood wrote the truth in his celebrated article. I have seen a Staffordshire collier walk off with a comrade’s ear in his waistcoat pocket after a Sunday morning’s quiet amusement. However, wait patiently, and trust me, I am still as big a vagabond as ever.”

Now was my chance, a great one! I could make a grand *finale* to my Victorian career. There in the book I saw written prescriptions to be made up for the inspector general and his family. I could commence with poisoning them

all, follow up with the half-dozen warders who were taking physic, steal the keys, raise a riot amongst the prisoners, and let them loose on the country. Then Mr. Macpherson would be gibbeted by an indignant populace for his innocent share in the transaction. Anarchy would set in, whilst I, gaily sailing over the Pacific toward the Golden Gate, would concoct a pleasing tale for the *'Frisco News Letter* of the last escapade of "The Vagabond" in Australia. But I forbore, after battling strongly with the temptation. I think I deserve credit for my forbearance, for Gil Blas himself never had such a grand chance of playing the mischief generally.