

Ballarat Courier
22nd March 1890

MR MERCER'S LETTER

As was only natural, I was very much gratified by Mr Alexander Mercer's letter, from South Yarra, to the treasurer of the "Touchstone" testimonial in Wednesday's *Courier*. The gratification was all the greater, as I never had the pleasure of numbering that gentleman amongst those whom I may term my intimate personal friends, for circumstances did not bring us together frequently, face to face and hand to hand. It is something for a poor Ballarat newspaper-writer to be constantly read by a South Yarra gentleman; but it is much more when such a writer as myself receives such and encomium, under such peculiar circumstances, from such a gentleman. And yet when I ponder over that letter I hardly know whether to feel glad or sad. I feel that Mr Mercer wrote what he thought, but, oh, I also feel that he has said too much in my praise. It is true that at times I have felt myself to be, in a way,

An infant crying in the night,

An infant crying for the light,

And with no language but a cry,

and I have only been too satisfied to remain such a crying infant, instead of being a man up and doing something to really advance my fellow man, and thus, in my humble way, try to leave the world a little better than I found it. It is true that many a time I have battled, with more or less feeble force, for what I considered to be the right; but oftener have I sat down and merely shook my head at seeing the wrong prevail. I hate the pride that apes humility, and I am never going to play the part of a Uriah Heep in Ballarat; but I know myself better than Mr A. Mercer can possibly know me, and I can assure him that I am not all his kindly fancy paints me. I have not it in me to be reformer such as he pictures, though it might be true that I would dare to be a Daniel, if I only felt myself possessed of the necessary qualifications; but, as Shakespeare's Touchstone says, - "There's much virtue in an if." Were I ten times better than I am, and had done all the things I ought to have done, I feel I would be rewarded (if a man should be rewarded for doing his duty) when I found a cultivated man like Mr Mercer, writing, - "The reading of his 'Cornerisms' always gave pleasure, and I think made me wiser. I know they made me better morally and humanly." If only one man in the world can sincerely say that of my literary labor, then most assuredly I can feel that my labor has not been in vain. Mr Mercer is pleased that I am going to have an opportunity of travelling the old world, and he gives it as his opinion that no better man could be found in the colony for such a mission. Mr Mercer means what he says, but in saying so much he is very heavily handicapping me. It is not fair to expect too much from me. I am not a professional traveller, for I never left Victoria since I came to it a boy, except for a week's trip to Adelaide. I cannot be expected to compete with such experts as Julian Thomas or James Hingston, and I am not going to try. I merely propose to write simple little notes or paragraphs on what I happen to see or hear from day to day, and anyone could do that. Indeed, it is my opinion that a man does not want to travel all over the world to see the world. An observant man can see the city of London on an ant-hill, and a man who cannot see the world in a walk round his garden, will not see it from the top of St Paul's. But I will promise to do my very best to please Mr Mercer and my many other kind friends, young and old, rich and poor; and I hope to succeed, and return

safe and sound; for, as Sir Philip Sidney said – “He travels safe, and not unpleasantly, who is guarded by poverty and guided by love.”

“OFF IT IS”

Never have I been able to distinguish my friends so well as during the last few days in Ballarat. People whom I thought did not care a button for me warmly seize me by the hand, and wish me a happy journey. In fact, everyone, except a very few, seem to think that I am going on a pleasure excursion to kill time and spend money. But, such indeed is not the case. Some years ago I saw a splitter very drunk out in Bungaree. He was holding on very fast to a varandah post of the publichouse. He did not live very far away, and his wife came for him and tried to coax him to come home. “Come on, Bill,” she said kindly, “Come on home, and you will soon be better.” “Better,” said he, opening one eye, and trying to open the other, “better, is it? “Faix, I don’t want to be any better than I am!” That, in a sort, applies to me. Leave me to myself, and I don’t really want to be any better than I am in Ballarat. Here I have more friends than I could hope to ever make elsewhere. In walking the street every third or fourth person I meet is an acquaintance, and I leave this for other cities, where

Alone in crowds I’ll wander on,
And feel the charm of life is gone.

I love books, and I have a library of my own, every book of which is a familiar, and I have my little curios. I may wander through the Vatican, or the British Museum, but there every book will be a stranger to me, and I will long to be back once more amongst my own books and papers, even though in a new habitation. Oh, no! there is no pleasure for me to gain in going away that would not be more than counterbalanced in Ballarat. But my friends say it will do me good in improving my health and in enlarging my scope of observation. Perhaps they are right, for, “what everybody says must be true.” But it is not without many a pang that I am tearing myself away from away my old associations, animate and inanimate, and it is with fear and trembling I face my new career, and something like Shakespeare’s

Whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwilling to school

I am going to a new school, and I’m hanged if I half like it, for I don’t know how I will get on with my task, and in the very beginning I have than ordinary difficulties to meet. But once I am started, I feel I will push on somehow, and find a way or make one. Yet just now it is a clear case of –

First I would, and then I wouldn’t,
Then I could, and then I couldn’t.

But the die is now cast, and these will be my last “Cornerisms” written in Ballarat until my return; for I will leave on Tuesday. No doubt, I will send some “Cornerisms” from Melbourne if I can get a spare hour and a quiet corner; and then I will have to trust to time and tide for the next batches until I get travelling on land again, when my papers may be expected as regularly as usual, and no doubt I will find plenty to write about. I have to thank my friend the Ven Archdeacon Julius for sending me, from Melbourne, a letter to the Bishop OF Bedford, whose bishopric includes the back slums of East London, and who will thus put me in the way of gaining and insight into some of the depths of London misery. My dear good old friend, Martin Hosking, will give me, or get me, introductions to General Booth and to the Rev. Hugh Price Hughes, while through my friend, Bishop Moore, I will be furnished with an

introduction to Cardinal Manning, who knows so much about London poverty and London labor. That will be the great question when I get to England, as we can see by the gigantic strikes, the precursors of the coming revolution. Yes, yes; there will be plenty to write about – I fear there will be far too much. One thing will be certain, that I will a plain unvarnished tale unfold from week to week, I will honestly try not to allow my prejudices to warp my vision, and so in my old new existence I will “nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice.” But I wish in my heart that it was all over, and that I was back in Ballarat again with my old friends, and especially with my young friends.

“THE ROCKY ROAD TO DUBLIN.”

Yesterday evening some friends were talking to me about my coming journey. In the course of conversation one friend warned me of sea-sickness, and another asked me something about my voyage out. On the impulse of the moment I hummed them a song, which I wrote about fifteen years ago when I was a selector, and when I had stronger yearnings to pay a visit to the old country. The verses, which I described my own career up to that time, I adapted to the old Irish air of “The Rocky Road to Dublin,” and my friends, on hearing it, made me promise to put the song into a “Cornerism” before I left, and as it may interest some others, and be somewhat *apropos*, I think I may venture to oblige my friends and save myself the trouble of making more than one copy. I left the old country thirty-six years ago, a strong-willed boy of sixteen. I would go, and I went by myself. I knew as much of Australia then as the *educated* people know of it now. It was to me a country of bushrangers and blacks, and I thought that on landing all I had to do was to start right off and pick up a few bucketsful of gold, and come back in the same ship with a fortune to buy up everything. Well, things did not turn out as I planned them, and perhaps they won't turn out as I am planning them now; for I certainly am not any wiser at fifty than I was at fifteen. Indeed, a man cannot be a thorough fool under forty years of age. Well, anyhow, let the song speak for itself:-

A score of years and more
From Erin's isle I wandered
In search of golden ore,
Which diggers found and squandered.
Tears filled my father's eyes,
As we parted on the Liffey,
Though he thought a golden prize
I would win in a jiffey
Then soon in the steamboat
I found myself afloat
And then I soon did note
In my stomach a queer troubling;
To throw up I did begin,
I lost all I had in,
And I tugged hard at each shin,
As I left the bay of Dublin.

CHORUS –

It is a weary road –
A hard road back to Dublin;
It is a bothering road,
The rocky road to Dublin!

At length I got out here
To the famed shrine of Mammon;
I found provisions dear,
And that there was much gammon
Of the nuggets to be found
Which wanted folks to mind 'em;
They were hid in the ground
And, falx, I couldn't find 'em,
Though I searched everywhere
Till my purse was quite bare.
Well, I could not live on air
Like a lizard or a goblin,
So at two-inch mason work
I hammered, like a Turk,
On a road for a Mister Burke-
But 'twas not the road to Dublin.

CHORUS –

It is a weary road –
A hard road back to Dublin;
It is a bothering road,
The rocky road to Dublin.

I soon put down my tent,
And by a friend's advising
I on a station went,
And left macadamising.
My praises I won't sing,
I stood some bully-ragging,
They had me at everything,
From murdering sheep to dagging.
In spite of many a jee,
Which new chums then would hear,
I somehow learned to shear,
And went in for the "cobbling;"
Of pounds I earned a few;
I learned to spend them, too, and I thought as I did rue
This is not the road to Dublin.

CHORUS –

It is a weary road
A hard road back to Dublin;
It is a bothering road,
The rocky road to Dublin!

I've been to many a rush,
But fortune was contrary;
I've slogged hard in the bush,
I've potted in a dairy.
In prospecting for quartz
My belt I took a reef in;
At length I've got a block,
And if I get a flock,
Perhaps Fate will not mock,
As to succeed I'm struggling,
It may be is her grift,
Her smiles on me to shift,
And give me a good lift
On the rocky road to Dublin

CHORUS –

It is a weary road
A hard road back to Dublin;
It is a bothering road -
The rocky road to Dublin!

That don't seem to read so very bad, and supposing, for the fun of the thing, I post it up to date with another verse. How will this do?

I've managed to pull through
A lot of sells and schisms,
While sticking on like glue
To make "Cornerisms;"
But when of Ballarat
I every day grew fonder,
I'm forced to go from that
O'er the wide world to wander;
And I will have to write
On every striking sight,
And letters long indite
'Midst revolutions bubbling;
But I don't know how the sea
Will with myself agree –
Seasick I'll surely be
On the rocky road to Dublin

CHORUS –

It is a weary road
A hard road back to Dublin;

It is a bothering road,
The rocky road to Dublin!

Tom then goes on to talk about the Berlin International Labor Conference, Bismarck and his 'long-standing grudge' against the House of Hanover.