

Resource 7

A Penny, A Sweet and A Clean Slate

Jim had only meant to take a squiz. His father was down at the claim, and had sent Jim off to look for their mate Bill. The store was on the way, he hadn't thought it would matter much if he popped inside. It was always so warm in there, and he hardly ever got to go inside.

Jim and his Da had been on the goldfields for almost a year. They'd headed to Ballarat after Ma kicked them out. She said Da was a good for nothing, and she'd be better off without him. Jim decided to stick with Da. Da was a bit of a larrikin, quick with a song or a joke. He had lots of stories, some dark ones from the early days, before he'd been given his ticket.

Jim's Da had been sent out to the colonies on a convict ship. He always said that stealing that bridle had been the biggest blue he'd ever made, and if he ever caught Jim stealing anything he'd whip him from here to tomorrow. When it came to the store, the rule was "If you have nothing to spend, you don't go in." End of story.

Anyway, I almost forgot...the store. Like I said, it was cold and Jim could smell bread baking inside. In Winter, Mrs Sumner baked beaut bread to sell. It wouldn't hurt to go in, take a look around and have a bit of a sniff. Usually the door was closed, but that day it was ajar. As Jim slipped inside, he didn't even disturb the bell that sat atop the door jamb to warn Mr Sumner that a customer was about. That's probably what gave him the hide to do it.

Sitting on the counter was a basket of freshly baked rolls. Mr Sumner was out the back. Jim could hear him talking with his wife. Standing behind the counter, Jim realised that the rolls were easy pickings. He could grab one and be out of the door before Sumner came back. No one would even know that he'd been there. Quick as a flash, the roll was in Jim's pocket and you couldn't see him for dust.

Jim was around the corner, the roll halfway down his gob, when who should turn up but Bill. He knew the rule, and wanted to know where the roll had come from. Grabbing Jim firmly by the ear, he dragged him behind a tent and began the interrogation. "Where'd ya get that, then? ...Stone the crows! I should give you a right kick up the pants!"

It didn't matter to Bill that Mr Sumner would never know, and both Bill and Jim knew it sure as billy-oh wouldn't matter to Da. Bill laid it on the line. "Either you square it with Sumner, or I'll tell your Da." Bill gave Him a penny to pay for the roll, and sent him on his way. He had to get to the claim, or Da would have his hide as well. "I'll be checking in with Sumner later, mark my words, so be sure you get off and get it sorted."

When Jim got back to the store the door was firmly shut, and the bell sounded loud and clear as he pushed his way inside. When Jim went into the store with his Da, Mr Sumner usually had a few kind words for him, and Jim tried to drum up a few minutes of polite conversation in return. Today, though, Jim had a lot of trouble getting any words out. Head down, hands in his pockets, he shifted his weight from one foot to another while he chewed on his bottom lip and waited for the other customers to leave. Finally, Jim made his way to the counter, dragged the penny from his pocket and put it on the counter. When he looked up, his face was streaky from where the tears had cut through the grime.

Jim stammered out the story. Mr Sumner didn't smile, nor were there any kind words. For what seemed like a very long time, he didn't say anything at all. Then he called out to his wife, and she came out to the counter. He explained what Jim had done, while Jim waited for the axe to fall. Were they going to call the troopers?

Finally, Mr Sumner turned back to Jim. He pushed the penny back towards him. "That's not enough" he said. Jim was gob-smacked. He didn't know what to do. He turned his pockets out to show the Sumners that he had no more money. "Come back tomorrow," said Mr Sumner, "You're going to work for me for one week. *Then* we'll call it square."

It was tough making up a story to Da about why he couldn't help out on the claim, but Bill covered for him. He also said that Jim could keep the penny, as a reward for coming clean. Sumner worked Jim hard that week, but at the end of it, he handed over an all day sucker and a stern warning never to steal again. So, Jim ended up with a penny, a sweet and a clean slate. You can't do better than that.

